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By the same author
Reverence and Other Stories (2020)
Smile (2021)

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**FAME ATE MY
GIRLFRIEND**

**SHORT
STORIES**

BY OS KING

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ALL THAT GLITTERS

On a particularly turbulent morning, rain and wind wreaked havoc upon the impeccably manicured lawns and limbs of opulent exotic trees lining the streets of a prestigious neighbourhood. It was typical, while the rain could have begun at night and provided ambient sounds sending difficult sleepers into slumber, it poured down with a ferocity at five in the morning instead, when some were rising for their morning jogs and others were returning home from late night engagements.

The rain and wind tore through flower beds, uprooted lawn ornaments and damaged sculptures, one of which was flung against the expansive sliding glass doors of Grayson's residence with a resonant crash, abruptly waking him. He had been having trouble sleeping and had only managed a few hours before the rains began. He shouted an expletive out loud irritably, but as the glass remained unscathed he tugged the bed covers closer, cocooning himself, loath to relinquish the security of his king-sized bed. He wasn't looking forward to another day, and today was no different.

Within minutes he realised his sleep had been disturbed for good, and he was now wide awake with little hope of falling

back to sleep. He angrily pushed the covers off with his feet. His thoughts picked up from the night before, they were troubled and agitated by his precarious financial situation. He had emptied his trust fund and depleted his earnings from his fleeting successes in modelling and acting.

He had pursued his elusive agent, David Foster, for months in the hope of securing work. Foster, who had taken on Grayson as a favour because of his illustrious family background, knew him to be a handful and hadn't put him forward for anything of late. Yes, Grayson was blessed with classical good looks but he was almost too good looking to fit into any particular role also his lack of tact made him a difficult sell to photographers, media executives and film makers, especially in a fickle market which demanded public figures to be pristine and perfect both on and off screen, and while Grayson could shine on screen if he put his mind to it, he also had a habit of having disagreements about the smallest issues, sometimes just for the fun of it, at least that is what Foster thought. When pressed, Grayson put it down to his artistic integrity even though there was little of that on show. Grayson had become a media favourite because of the controversies he caused, but they were less interested in covering his creative work, most of which had fallen by the wayside.

Grayson had long been kept secure by his family's vast resources, a lustrously feathered nest of monetary security that shielded him from life's upheavals and downturns. This sense of security was unshakable until twelve months ago when this foundation was irrevocably altered. His father, in a move as unprecedented as it was unfathomable to those closest to him, renounced his fiscal obligation to the family and redirected the entirety of his considerable fortune toward the revitalisation of a neglected district in the city. His vision extended beyond mere infrastructural rejuvenation; he envisaged a future where every child in the district could not only dream of higher education but attain it, with funds allocated for completing a degree and an optional advance on property ownership. 'There is so much I can do for this city that I have called my home for the past decade and giving people a shot at a life such as mine is a privilege which I can afford!' He had said at the council meeting where politicians looked at him in surprise, awe and fear. They weren't used to wealthy luminaries taking such a strong and tangible stance on city poverty, especially Grayson Senior whose developments had partly caused some of the pockets of housing deprivation in the city.

Grayson Senior, whose wealth was the product of generations of astute financial dealings and inheritances

from his father and grandfather, was a solitary figure. An only son, he was a man of minimal words and, until that momentous turning point, virtually no acts of philanthropy. Yet, as he crossed the Atlantic on his private jet, accompanied by a business colleague, Hector Wallace, he had an epiphany. It was a sudden, stark realisation of his mortality. Something he never considered before. More vexing to him was the thought that his estate, which he felt was largely the result of his own hard work and dedication, would fall into the hands of his indolent kin. He would have none of that, he told himself. And within a space of days had altered his will.

Next, he orchestrated a gathering that would forever alter the family's trajectory and set the gossip circles alight. Within the opulent confines of his grandest urban residence, he hosted a brunch that was nothing short of a culinary symphony, the creation of an internationally acclaimed chef flown in just for the event. It was against this backdrop of delicate flavours and exquisite presentation that he unveiled his drastic decision. After declining to entertain requests for seconds from his family, he calmly and politely announced the severance of their inheritances and financial support, effective immediately. His declaration was met with disbelief and outrage.

'How dare you Grayson, after all we have given to you, to your work and to this family,' said his uncle before sinking in a plump armchair, exhausted and dizzy from the thought of having to work for himself.

Grayson's aunt, fainted and was left to languish on the sofa, a butler fanning her slowly with a magazine and offering her sips of water. There were confused yells and anguished cries, and foot-stomping tantrums that could be heard all the way in the kitchen. Even as valuable porcelain heirlooms flew towards him, propelled by hands that once caressed them lovingly, Grayson Senior's laughter echoed through the halls. He dodged the projectiles with a nimble grace, his mirth undiminished by the chaos. He was now certain he had made the right decision and he had enjoyed every moment of sharing it with his family.

A month later, he vanished as completely as he had erased their fortunes. Unconcerned and perhaps still reeling from their sudden descent into a financial abyss, the family found themselves unable, or perhaps unwilling, to seek him out. The legacy of Grayson Senior, now intertwined with the fate of a once-forgotten district, left his family to navigate a world stripped of the comforts and certainties they had taken for granted. Their fate sent shockwaves through similar families who rushed to lock down their fortunes and

caused a spike in demand for legal services. It also led to a slew of high profile articles and opinion pieces in magazines and news items, keeping the Grayson empire on the front page for a long while.

Grayson's feelings towards his father were ambivalent. The burden and privilege of his name, Grayson Junior, set him apart in a family drama rife with sibling rivalry. The distinct division—Grayson Senior and Junior—stoked flames of envy among his four brothers, a testament to their father's unabashed favouritism. On the day their fortunes were disowned, the brothers displayed a mix of emotions that was as shallow as it was volatile, oscillating between righteous indignation at their disinheritance and gleeful schadenfreude at seeing the golden boy dethroned. Amidst the familial tempest, Grayson Junior's response to his father's declaration was to offer a handshake paired with a wish for his father to find his residence in hell—a sentiment that oddly enough, only endeared him further to Grayson Senior. This paradoxical bond stemmed from a shared stubbornness; Grayson was cherished because he alone dared to defy the patriarch's authority. His brothers had aligned with the privileges of their birth, worked in various interests of the family holdings and married people of equivalent or higher standing and stature. They never wavered from their call and upbringing, and were highly

protective of their status. Grayson Junior on the other hand eschewed most of the trappings of his good fortune other than the fortune itself, largely because he could not fathom working for any of the family concerns and was more interested in creative pursuits that he felt reflected his true self. In a twist of irony, Grayson Senior had left Junior a mysterious legacy, contingent upon a childhood vow forgotten by time—to pursue and excel in a passion, thereby carving out his distinct legacy.

Yet, at 27, Grayson's recollection of such a promise was long forgotten. His life so far, a mosaic of moments in the limelight, had not satisfied his hunger for fame earned through means other than the family business. From early ventures in modelling to minor dalliances in theatre and film, he chased the elusive shadow of celebrity, a pursuit mired in frustration, which unlike others, he had not expected to encounter. These unmet aspirations caused a perpetual emotional gale of rage, shame, and dwindling self-confidence within him, a tempest veiled only by the flimsiest of facades. Behind the mask, he struggled, his energy and focus consumed by the fear that he might never cross the threshold into his thirties with his dreams fulfilled.

As the storm dwindled to a symphony of gentle raindrops, and the relentless wind fell away, the parting clouds

welcomed the sun, its rays illuminating the expansive sliding glass doors of Grayson's home. In this moment of calm, Grayson found solace in the ritualistic opening of an almost empty vodka bottle on his bedside table. A deep gulp offered a fleeting reprieve as he sank back against the headboard, the world outside momentarily forgotten. He lit a cigarette and stubbed it out after one drag, remembering the cost the habit could have on his looks. Then he decided one more couldn't matter and lit another cigarette relishing the burning sensation in his throat but not so much the watering of his eyes stung by the plume of smoke. He considered his options and didn't like any of those he had come up with the night before including completing his degree and entering the workforce in some white collar capacity. He shuddered at the thought. He decided to redo his portfolio of pictures and submit it to various agencies. He was determined to find better representation than David Foster and started making a list while finishing off the bottle of vodka.

The persistent ping of his phone broke his concentration, a rapid succession of alerts that he initially sought to silence —until he noticed they bore the digital signature of his long-absent agent, Foster. With each message, Grayson's interest piqued, and by the final one, he was sitting upright, a mix of surprise and anticipation rousing him. An unexpected

opportunity: a meeting with a director of international renown, set for the afternoon at a newly minted bistro, the talk of the town.

He looked to his side wanting to tell Mimi, but then remembered she had left him, emptying the flat of her ample and tasteful shoe collection, designer wear, crystals and meditation rocks. She took the dog, a sullen basset hound, and parakeet and the Bauhaus themed living room furniture. On her way out she had flung half his wardrobe into the pool. He had managed to shut her out before the rest suffered the same dramatic fate of a soggy mess. Mimi had been with Grayson for five years and had grown unhappy at waiting for him to propose. She had nudged, cajoled and even tried to bribe him with a suite of bedroom antics she had culled from her friends, but nothing had shifted Grayson. Even when she herself proposed, he was not enthusiastic. Mimi had not intended to move out but rather thought it would make Grayson change his mind as he would be horrified at the thought of her leaving. Her friends had assured her it would work. Instead, Grayson helped her pack and paid for the movers. He seemed unconcerned about the whole thing and gave her a distracted wave goodbye after securing his wardrobe. He shut the sliding doors and drew the curtains. That was the last Mimi had seen of him.

Grayson had grown used to the spare look of his now single dwelling and hadn't bothered to fill up the emptiness - it felt expansive, light and free from an emotional investment that Grayson felt was oppressive, overindulgent and boring all at once. He had reminded himself to end it with Mimi on numerous occasions but had forgotten to go through with it. He nodded to himself as if to confirm that he had in fact found Mimi's tastes and demands extravagant and he did a mental search to check if he was upset about their break up but found nothing. He didn't miss her. He wasn't upset. He had more pressing demands on his time and Grayson, had been someone who was able to attract the attention he required when he so chose.

He threw on his trunks for his usual morning swim but changed his mind when he saw the state of the pool. Motivated by the potential of the day's meeting, he dismissed the disarray of his backyard oasis in favour of the sunlight's promise. Today, he would embrace the challenge, regardless of the artistic hurdles that awaited. It was a necessary masquerade, a stepping stone towards the stardom he yearned, even if it meant navigating the complexities of collaboration that fame often required.

His phone rang.

'Alright, Grayson... just try not to mess this up,' Foster's voice crackled through the phone.

'I'm on it. Nice of you to finally find something for me.'

'Well, I have been trying Grayson, but times are not easy, funding has dried up almost everywhere, you know that, right?' Foster said, more appeasing than he usually was

'Do you have a script?' Grayson said, stroking his chin and looking in the mirror uncertain if he should leave the stubble or go for a clean shave.

'No. It's not a reading. Just meet them and see what they have to say. It's all good Grayson, just be there and listen rather than impose your own views on them.'

'Anything else I should know?' asked Grayson, irritated by the assumption that he couldn't handle a basic meeting.

'Just remember that you are at the start of your career and need to make compromises. Meet people half way Grayson. Just try ... I'm running out of options for you'.

Grayson nodded in agreement and then said so. He also made a note to find another agent, he found Foster disrespectful especially given the amount he paid him.

Grayson also felt that Foster hadn't gone all out for him even though he had traded on the Grayson name to get himself into exclusive clubs and events. Foster had also managed to expand his portfolio based on the Grayson name alluding to contacts with Grayson Senior which were of course non-existent.

Refreshed by a shower and a shave, Grayson chose a navy suit and white shirt that still carried the prestige of a recent photoshoot. Surveying his reflection, he acknowledged the magnetism he naturally wielded—a blend of classical allure and an indomitable spirit that set him apart. He felt he made the suit rather than vice versa. Grayson was someone who could be very charming when he wanted to be, but most of the time he held back mainly because he felt that others should make more of an effort. Even with his striking features and poised stature that journalists said spoke of a bygone era's elegance, he was unsure of his star power and whether it would be enough to launch him into the stratosphere of the very few stars who were immortalised. The press from his last minor role in a film was inconclusive, although a reputable journalist had said he was too good looking for the role and distracted from the central premise of the film. How was that his fault thought Grayson at the time, especially since he had auditioned for a role that was more central and riddled with character faults which he felt

would help him move away from the notion that it was just his looks that were carrying him in the industry.

Grayson also recognised another side to himself, which he hardly hid from others and that was his underlying resolve and in-built need for rebellion. But he only understood and recognised some parts of his complexity, choosing to ignore much of his emotional states and responses to situations he had been in. Grayson was someone who loathed introspection and had never kept a diary or a journal. He really felt self-reflection was not something he wanted or needed to do. This had led to clashes with tutors when he engaged in acting classes. He had left vowing to do his own thing which he still felt would hold him in good stead, ignoring the fact he had gotten nowhere in his career so far and it was largely due to his own doing.

He let out a deep sigh and shrugged his shoulders repeatedly to prevent his thoughts from spiralling ever outwards drawing in so many things he just didn't want to consider and hopefully would never need to. In this moment, Grayson confirmed the duality of his pursuit: the quest for fame on his terms and the inevitable compromises it entailed. Yet, as he prepared to step out, he recognised that it was precisely this tension that he could rev up to

make himself even more captivating, a paradox poised on the brink of realisation.

Upon his arrival at the newly opened Café des Acteurs, Grayson drew a sharp breath. He could feel himself melt and merge in these surroundings. The place signalled high-brow taste and elegance, with a nod to the timeless allure of classical Europe wrapped in the enigma of modern-day sophistication - a perfect reflection of Grayson himself. The polished grey marble floors reflected the afternoon light, casting a glow that was both inviting and ethereal. The furniture, each piece a silent ode to the art of craftsmanship, was arranged with such a deliberate grace that the space's cosy dimensions were elevated to a quintessential elegance. The staff, who appeared to have sauntered off a Parisian runway, embodied an effortless grace that was both captivating and disarmingly polished. Their attire, a blend of classic chic and modern flair, mirrored the bistro's ethos of understated luxury, ensuring that their presence enhanced rather than overshadowed the ambiance.

Presented with a menu that felt like a parchment of culinary promises, each dish a marriage of finesse and flavour, Grayson was momentarily distracted from his pre-meeting jitters. The waiter, a doppelgänger in height, bestowed

upon him a smile that seemed to have been perfected over countless encounters with the crème de la crème of society, making Grayson feel like the protagonist of this finely orchestrated symphony of dining excellence. As he was settling into the narrative of his potential career pivot, a familiar voice sliced through the air, pulling him back to a subplot he hadn't anticipated revisiting.

'Grayson? Oh my goodness! It is you.' It was none other than Hector Wallace, a close business associate of his father. Grayson found himself face to face with a link to his past, at the very juncture of his hopeful leap into the future. This was not what he needed he thought. He smiled uncertainly before pushing himself to broaden his smile and stand, shaking Hector's outstretched hand.

'It really is a dream seeing you here!' said Hector. He caught sight of Grayson's arched brow and laughed embarrassedly. 'Oh, what I mean is that I have been wanting to catch up with you and convey my thoughts about your father. I am sure all will be well soon. He is bound to reappear.' He touched Grayson lightly on the shoulder and gave him a small, sympathetic smile.

Grayson nodded. 'Yes, thank you. I look forward to his return ... well I mustn't keep you Hector. I have to meet

some people myself,' he said glancing towards the entrance.

'Oh! Then you don't know. This establishment is mine. Let's move you to a more prominent spot shall we? Next to the windows? It's such a nice day Grayson, it would be a shame not to enjoy some of the sunshine.'

Grayson followed Hector absently. Confused at learning of Hector's new venture.

'And how did this come about?' said Grayson, sitting down, looking around the venue once more, registering all he had before but this time with the knowledge that the design was Hector's.

Hector motioned for a waiter. 'This has always, always been a dream of mine, to have a place of elegance and luxury that only attracts the best - the finest. I personally see to everything ... and find it wonderfully relaxing to be here myself.'

'Are you still working in finance? Have those interests changed?'

Hector shook his head. 'Those are intact, I have hired someone to oversee all that.'

'Well, I wish you all the best Hector,' said Grayson flatly.

'I feel my creative energies are more suited here and when I saw the venue, well there was no question about it. I spent months fine tuning the design and most of the furnishings and fittings are imported,' said Hector, with an evident puff in his chest.

Hector smiled and held Grayson's gaze, expecting further questions. He realised that Grayson was no longer interested in the cafe's origin story or anything about Hector. It was typical - Grayson was not dissimilar to his father, easily bored and almost exclusively focussed on himself. Hector marvelled at how alike the two looked, with the same commanding height, broad stature and easy smile. Hector thought that he would have made a lot more of himself if he had the looks of Grayson Junior especially with the capital behind him. He often wondered why Grayson had stuck at his creative pursuits without throwing his hat in the ring and funding his own projects, he had the capital after all, well no longer, but there was a time when it would have been easy.

Grayson was looking out the window deep in thought unhappy that the meeting had brought his father to mind. Grayson had not thought about where his father was and

how he felt about his disappearance. They weren't close in a traditional sense, but there was always a bond between them. Hector made his excuses and left to welcome other customers. Grayson barely registered when he left.

As the hour waned, the café's elegant ambiance seemed to stretch with Grayson's patience. The rhythmic clink of fine china and the subdued conversations around him faded into the backdrop for his escalating apprehension. He had time to think which bothered him, especially these days when he just wanted to be kept occupied with something. Then, as if summoned by his tension, a figure approached, cutting through the café's refined atmosphere with an air of undeniable purpose.

Christophe El Amir, tall and angular with a full head of dark, unruly hair, exuded an aura of both intrigue and authority. His approach was measured, his presence immediately commanding attention, not just from Grayson but from anyone within sight.

'I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting, Mr. Grayson Theodore Sterling,' Christophe said, his voice a blend of apology and confidence as he extended his hand.

Grayson, taken aback by the use of his full name, stood to meet Christophe 's handshake. 'You used my full name,' he remarked.

'Ah, of course,' Christophe replied, his smile broadening, reflecting a warmth that seemed to fill the space between them. He settled into the chair opposite Grayson, flipping open his laptop with a casual flourish that spoke of his comfort and familiarity with being in control. As a waiter arrived to take their orders, Christophe's attention briefly flitted to the menu before returning to Grayson, a clear indication of his priorities.

'I've been rushing around today,' Christophe confessed, his gaze steady on Grayson. 'My assistant is off with the flu, so I've had to juggle a lot. I know it's no excuse for my tardiness, but it's the reality of my day ... ah well ... anyway ...'

Grayson nodded in understanding, his initial irritation dissipating under Christophe 's earnest demeanour.

'Of course, this will be my first film since Nexus', continued Christophe, 'You have seen it?'

'Yes. Yes, an impressive and resonant piece of film making. I was sorry about the fall out from it. It detracted from the

film itself.' Grayson was trying to keep level because he realised that working with Christophe could be interesting but there were broader concerns. He knew that Christophe was not afraid of controversy, in fact some said he courted it. He wondered why his agent hadn't just told him who the director was, Grayson wished he was wearing something more contemporary than his suit. He looked over at Christophe who was staring at his laptop screen while downing his coffee. Christophe had fine stubble, was wearing a green t-shirt and worn jeans, his round tortoiseshell glasses pushed up on the bridge of his nose. He had an effortless look to him that was understated and fashionable at the same time.

'Oh, the controversy about my film ... Ha! It wasn't too bad, I said what I needed to say, it upset people, then there was the censorship ... whatever, I just can't even be bothered to go there ... we live in such sensitive times, there's no pleasing everyone but now there is no pleasing anyone!' said Christophe sitting back in his chair and smiling at Grayson. 'I stand by my work. I enjoyed every minute of making it and also everything that followed it,' laughed Christophe.

'You outed an executive who no longer works in the industry,' said Grayson.

'Well, I fought back. The film meant a great deal to me ... people should think about what it means to make this kind of art in intolerant times. My God!' Christophe held up his hands as if to dismiss the topic. He shut his laptop his eyes locking with Grayson's. 'None of us are totems of perfection Grayson, we all have something we would prefer others not to know, especially working in this industry. But I have been given another chance at making a film and I am taking it. Let's move on, shall we?'

Grayson nodded, feeling even less comfortable after listening to Christophe's reasoning.

'You have caught my attention, Grayson. It's not just your ability to act; it's the undeniable presence you command. On screen, your performances are compelling, but it's your sheer physical presence that's truly arresting. You possess a kind of magnetism that's rare—your looks don't just captivate; they resonate on a deeper level, creating an unforgettable impact.'

Grayson nodded solemnly, resisting the urge to say anything.

'In real life, this effect is even more pronounced. Your appearance isn't just aesthetically remarkable; it carries with it an intensity that's both intriguing and disarming. It's

this unique combination of your acting skills and your striking visage that I find perfect for the role I have in mind. You're not just performing; you're compelling the audience to feel, to react viscerally to your presence. I need this for my film. I do.'

The conversation then veered into the unexpected as Christophe broached the subject of his film. 'I like to work with a sense of intrigue,' he began, his voice taking on a conspiratorial edge. 'Not everyone appreciates it, but it's how I find truth, authenticity in my storytelling. And for this next film, I see you playing a pivotal role.'

Grayson's interest was piqued, his earlier reservations giving way to a cautious optimism. 'I'm honoured,' he said, leaning in, 'though I'm curious about the role and the story you want to tell.'

Christophe paused and looked out the window. 'It's about love,' he finally said, the word hanging between them, laden with unexpected gravity. 'I want to explore its complexities, its controversies. Love, in its most authentic form, can be revolutionary.'

Grayson hoped he hid his surprise well because he quite nearly spat out his coffee. This was not what he had been expecting from a director known for his wayward political

pieces that tore through social convention and formulaic expectations as if they were as inconsequential as dust on an old bookshelf.

'Love?'

'Yes, Grayson. Love, which can be the most controversial aspect of living!' Christophe slammed his fist on the table as if to convince himself. 'Are you in?'

'It's certainly a departure from your previous work,' Grayson remarked. He wanted to say more, much more and also ask a slew of questions, but he told himself not to push it - this was the only opportunity before him at the moment and there was nothing else on the horizon.

Christophe smiled, a gesture that seemed to acknowledge the challenge. 'Life is full of surprises, Grayson. And sometimes, it's the themes we least expect that compel us the most.'

Grayson raised a brow. Christophe was a director who had made his mark at a young age and he was still young, only slightly older than Grayson himself, so he found Christophe's manner of speaking imbued with philosophical wisdoms rather pretentious. But he kept silent, who was he to judge the person presenting him with an opportunity for

work. Grayson decided to give in and listen rather than challenge and as their conversation deepened, the initial formality melted away, revealing two individuals connected by a shared passion for storytelling and film. Grayson, who had entered the café with a mix of hope and scepticism, found himself envisioning a future where his talents could align with Christophe 's vision. He allowed himself to drop his guard and feel a close affinity with Christophe and let go of his initial reticence.

'The thing is Grayson, there is still the question of financial backers,' said Christophe , interrupting Grayson's thoughts.

'I have your details now and will get in touch. Good?'

Christophe collected his things hurriedly, his phone alarm going off.

Grayson stood, hoping to hide his disappointment. He waved goodbye to Christophe and remove his jacket irritably, ordering a large vodka. He was reeling from Christophe 's abrupt departure and his initial burst of hope had been doused, leaving him to grapple with the harsh reality of the situation. The arrival of his drink, served with an unasked-for side of Hector's company, did little to lift his spirits. Grayson was not in a place to discuss anything with

Hector. He was also going to fire his agent, Foster. He felt overwhelmed by his anger to the point of being numb.

'I couldn't help overhear some of your conversation,' said Hector.

'You need to get better sound proofing in here, especially since you aim to attract those that value discretion.'

'Yes, well, we have space at the back for that and also the garden is very secluded. I must seat you there next time you come.'

Grayson nodded slowly and sipped his drink. Looking out the window and watching people walk by. He took a final gulp of his drink and slammed the glass down, a little harder than he intended to. 'I need to head off Hector, but thank you for your hospitality.'

'Have another,' said Hector, Indicating for the waiter.

'Am I paying? I noticed the director left me with the bill,' said Grayson, flipping open his wallet.

'It's on me. You never have to pay for anything when you are here Grayson. I want to help in any way I can.'

The offer of another drink on the house, a gesture of goodwill, barely registered with Grayson. He was too caught in the undertow of his own unhappiness, teetering on the edge of an emotional abyss.

'I have a proposition for you Grayson, are you listening?'

Hector's voice seemed to float by, untethered to Grayson's immediate concern of simply escaping the day's failures. Suddenly, the world seemed to slip from beneath him, plunging him into darkness.

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Grayson's consciousness flickered back, the cool embrace of the open air caressing his skin with an unsettling gentleness. He blinked slowly, the beauty of the café's secluded garden coming into view. The shrubs and plants had small lights on them and there were people setting up a makeshift stage with sound system at the far end of the garden. There were lanterns strung up across a trellis and chairs, tables and armchairs were arranged by busy staff. Grayson saw that he was lying on a sofa in the middle of the garden, he tried to push himself up but fell back weakly. As his senses gathered, a shadow loomed, the figure of Hector Wallace imposingly outlined against the fading daylight. Hector's silhouette towered over Grayson as he struggled to

orient himself, the weight of his gaze pressing down like an unseen hand, fear and confusion churning within Grayson.

'I've never fainted before,' Grayson said, his voice laced with a dawning suspicion as he caught Hector's eye. The statement hung in the air, a silent accusation behind the confusion of his awakening. Hector's presence felt suffocating, the circumstances of Grayson's collapse painting his intervention in a sinister hue. Was it merely the stress of the day that had brought him to his knees, or had Hector orchestrated this moment? The thought that something more insidious could have facilitated his blackout—perhaps something slipped into his drink—sent a shiver through Grayson, mingling with the remnants of unease. As Hector offered explanations and assurances, his words seemed to echo from afar, their sincerity lost in Grayson's burgeoning mistrust.

'Grayson, you fainted. It must have been stress or something like that. I took good care of you. Please rest for a while until you get your strength back.'

'I'm just going to go home now,' said Grayson, standing and then sitting back down again, his knees trembling. Hector sat next to him and patted his knee.

'Everything is going to be alright Grayson. You are safe here. We need to talk before you go anyhow. I have news!'

A waiter brought them coffee, water and small biscuits. Grayson, still shaking, accepted the refreshments.

'Look Grayson, I have decided to back Christophe El Amir's film and there are others willing to pitch in financially too. I spoke to him just an hour ago. So, you see, you'll be able to do the film. Isn't that great?' Hector smiled broadly and encouragingly.

Grayson felt deeply uncomfortable. Initially, this might have been interpreted as a generous act of support, but for Grayson, it seemed to hold an ulterior motive. His acquaintance with Hector had been sporadic and superficial, limited to the occasional meeting in the presence of his father. This lack of a substantial relationship only served to amplify Grayson's scepticism regarding Hector's sudden and significant investment in Christophe's venture. While Christophe was a visionary, his track record in the industry was less than stellar. His films, though artistically commendable, had never managed to turn a profit. His most recent work had not only flopped but had also embroiled him in a bitter conflict with a high-profile industry executive, causing ructions in the film making

community. Hector, considered to be an astute and successful business man would hardly have put his weight behind Christophe's film - it defied rational explanation.

It became apparent through subsequent conversations that Hector's investment was an effort to bolster Grayson's own career. This insight did little to alleviate Grayson's apprehension; instead, it intensified it. The notion that Hector was making such a calculated move to influence his career trajectory felt intrusive and unwarranted. Grayson found himself wrestling with the implications especially the indebtedness the whole situation entailed. Grayson felt his autonomy slipping away. Hector's actions, while outwardly supportive, hinted at a deeper expectation of reciprocity or loyalty that Grayson was not prepared to give. The uneasy mix of gratitude, obligation, and discomfort weighed heavily on him, and made him consider his engagement with the film project and his future in an industry rife with hidden agendas and unspoken alliances, something he had managed to avoid thus far, but here he was getting dragged right into the middle of it.

Over the subsequent months, Grayson endeavoured to distance himself from the project. There were still arrangements to be made and he hadn't confirmed his participation with Christophe. To signal his disengagement

he accepted advertising roles he would have once dismissed out of hand, he rented out his apartment and relocated to a more modest one. Despite these steps, his agent Foster, would not let the matter drop. Overnight he transformed into a relentless advocate for Grayson's participation in Christophe's film, his daily calls a constant echo of encouragement and enticement.

'You have to do this Grayson. Think about what it could mean for you, for your career,' said Foster in one of their many calls.

'Think about what it could mean for you too Foster,' said Grayson before hanging up.

Christophe's persistence matched Foster's enthusiasm. His startling admission that he would abandon the project without Grayson put a new spin on the matter.

Confrontations with Christophe over this unexpected stipulation only led to dismissive laughter; Christophe remained unshakeably confident in his initial choice of Grayson for the lead.

As the film's intrigue seeped into the public sphere, fuelled by the dual allure of Christophe's controversial past and the enigmatic support of Hector and a roster of heavy weight financial backers, the spotlight on Grayson intensified.

Media interest surged, linking him not only to the film but also to the sensational story of his father's mysterious actions and the family's dramatic loss of their fortune. The attention led to a rise in interest among the public and offers escalated, suggesting a future replete with leading roles, prestigious endorsements, and the kind of stardom that had once seemed a distant dream. The buzz was undeniable, with social media channels and magazine covers heralding Grayson as the face of an eagerly anticipated cinematic venture. The fervour reached such a pitch that Grayson found himself at a crossroads, torn between his initial reservations and the seductive promise of the limelight and all it brought with it.

The relentless campaign waged by Foster, combined with Christophe's unwavering conviction in his talent, gradually wore down his defences and reticence about Hector's involvement. The transformation was subtle, a slow capitulation to the prospect of heightened fame and the validation it promised. Grayson's scepticism began to wane as his career suddenly exploded with potential. Ultimately, Grayson acquiesced to the role that had become the epicentre of so much speculation and excitement. Hector's invisible hand, once perceived as manipulative, now seemed to guide him toward a destiny that, perhaps, had been inevitable from the start. Grayson's journey from

reluctant participant to eager protagonist was complete, his path forward illuminated by the spotlight that awaited him.

As pre-production gave way to the rigours of filming, Grayson found himself increasingly enveloped in the fabric of the project. Christophe's script, a creation wrought from his own vision, delved into the misery of unrequited love, drawing its characters into a vortex of despair from which escape seemed a mere fantasy. This narrative, weighed heavily on the cast and crew, its melancholy seeping into their daily work. Yet, amid this somber atmosphere, Christophe remained steadfast in his belief that their collective effort would strike a chord with audiences and film critics alike.

Grayson's interactions with Christophe were marked by a tension that was both challenging and invigorating. Christophe demanded everything from his actors, pushing them to the brink of their emotional and professional limits to capture the raw, unfiltered essence of their characters.

'I can't do this anymore,' Grayson would protest, drained by the day's demands, only to be met by Christophe's uncompromising insistence on giving him even more. This relentless pace combined with the heightened emotions of the dialogue for the film, forced Grayson to confront his

innermost thoughts—fears and questions about his father, his life, and his relationships—topics he had long pushed to the side. Hector's presence became a constant during these turbulent times, his support ostensibly a lifeline for Grayson during the challenges of production. Yet, as their conversations ventured into the murky waters of Grayson Senior's past, Hector revealed a history riddled with moral ambiguities and legal entanglements. The more Grayson learned, the more his image of his father—and by extension, his understanding of his own legacy—began to crumble.

‘You don’t have to be concerned about any of this Grayson, this stays between us,’ reassured Hector. ‘I wasn’t planning on discussing your father’s business dealings with you, but I just wanted you to know that I have always been on his side and now yours.’

Grayson’s despair at what Hector told him about his father’s business dealings seeped out during a pivotal scene on set. He recoiled from his co-star's embrace, his protest was not just about the authenticity of the portrayal but a manifestation of his broader existential crisis. ‘This doesn't feel right. I can't kiss you this way,’ he objected, pushing away the notion as much as his scene partner. Christophe's patience, already thin from the vagaries of production, neared breaking point. Yet, recognising the critical juncture

they were at—just a week from wrapping filming—he took a different approach. After a collective pause, Christophe took Grayson in his arms and gave him a long, firm hug. He guided Grayson away for a private conversation, his demeanour softening.

‘Let’s walk,’ Christophe said, certain this film would shine brighter than anything he hoped to produce.

‘This is not an insurmountable challenge, Grayson. We’re on the verge of completing something truly remarkable. You have revealed aspects of yourself that have pushed the others too and brought this film to life in a way I never thought possible.’ The weight of the film’s success lay heavily on Christophe’s shoulders, a burden made all the more poignant by the personal emotional investment he had poured into this endeavour as the filming progressed and he genuinely felt that Grayson had made a difference to what could have been a completely different rendering of his script, one which would have been much less impactful.

In a moment that would redefine their relationship and the course of the film, Christophe took a bold step. He pulled Grayson close, not just as a director to his actor but as a mentor imparting a crucial lesson. With a deep, lingering, illustrative kiss, Christophe shattered the barriers of doubt

surrounding Grayson, leaving him stunned. 'Don't believe everything you hear or are told. We are all actors on our own stage,' said Christophe.

This intimate, unanticipated gesture sparked a profound realisation within Grayson, urging him to question the narratives constructed around him, those he presumed about others and finally those spun by Hector about his father. Grayson resolved to delve deeper into the stories that had shaped his perception, to seek his own truths about the tales of intrigue and legacy that had entangled his life. Fuelled by this newfound resolve and Christophe's faith in him, Grayson returned to set with a changed perspective. The last week of filming transformed from a period of endurance into one of revelation. Grayson's performance elevated the film's scenes to new heights and gave him courage to confront the complexities of his own story.

Following its release, the film became an unprecedented sensation, sweeping through awards globally with a force that left everyone involved, from cast to crew, in a state of bewildered elation. The accolades piled up, and with each trophy, each standing ovation, Grayson and his colleagues found themselves thrust into the relentless spotlight of fame which included the barrage of questions from the

public, journalists and film executives. Their every word and action became fodder for public consumption, dissected and repackaged by the insatiable gears of the celebrity machinery.

Grayson, once an actor in search of his path, was now a luminary, his image etched into the pantheon of cinematic success. The whirlwind of promotional tours was both exhilarating and exhausting. Grayson, riding the crest of this newfound fame, navigated the gauntlet of interviews and appearances with a grace and humility he hadn't known he possessed. Through this frenzy of activity, Hector's presence dwindled to occasional messages and promises of unwavering support. Grayson pursued his own research while maintaining his distance, and soon he was armed with revelations that cast Hector's narratives about his father in dubious light.

Grayson was able to return to the sanctuary of his prestigious neighbourhood and old apartment. His thoughts about his father and the relationship with Hector troubled him. Grayson sought solace in the routine of swimming and reading, grounding himself in the familiar while summoning up the courage to confront Hector. He knew he had to follow through with it.

It was with considerable weariness and a mind swirling with accusations and doubts that Grayson ventured to Café des Acteurs, determined to seek answers or perhaps closure. It was a cool evening and after signing autographs en route, having been spotted by fans, Grayson finally made it to the cafe. He could see Hector behind the bar, rifling through some papers. He rapped gently on the door. Hector looked up and smiled in surprise.

‘Welcome Grayson! Imagine a rising star gracing this establishment,’ said Hector with humour, patting him lightly on the back. Grayson moved away from him in a deliberate shun. He viewed Hector with obvious disdain. The tension in the air became charged, waiting for a spark to ignite. Grayson was now armed with the knowledge of Hector's duplicities and the unsettling revelations about his father. He felt a cold determination settle over him.

‘I made this happen for you Grayson,’ said Hector, annoyed at a lack of welcoming reciprocity from Grayson.

And there it was, thought Grayson, his debt to Hector.

‘I could have ignored your situation. I didn’t need to help. And look at you now. On the cover of every magazine imaginable, your face plastered across billboards and major directors wanting to work with you,’ Hector said, thumping

a fashion magazine on the counter pointedly which had Grayson on the cover.

Grayson pushed his hands deeper into his pockets, a cloud forming over his face. 'You made a lot of money from your investment in the film Hector - you did benefit from it yourself.'

'That's not the point is it? Huh Grayson? ... You know, you are so like your father. After everything the two of us did together he thought he could walk away from it all, just like that,' said Hector snapping his fingers, his face flushed in anger.

'What does this have to do with my father?' said Grayson, a sudden fear causing him to go cold, a dawning realisation that perhaps his father hadn't walked away after all.

'Everything,' said Hector. Moving closer towards Grayson, who stumbled back against a chair.

'I know it was my father who helped you out Hector, not the other way around. He knew about your irregular methods of doing business and it was he who you turned to when you needed help. My father didn't cross those lines, you did,' said Grayson, trying to be brave a tremor coming into his voice.

Hector raised his hands as if in defeat. He paused for a time, hands on hips and smiled in appeasement. 'Come, come, we have come too far for this to develop into a misunderstanding. Especially now Grayson! It's time for joy. Celebration. Have a seat, let's have a drink and talk. Okay? Let's talk,' said Hector moving to the bar.

Hector's casual offer of a drink, meant to smooth over the rising animosity, unsettled Grayson even further. Hector poured them both a drink and nudged a glass in Grayson's direction. He then turned his back, busying himself with bottles and glasses. Grayson's mind raced, echoes of warnings and rumours intertwining with his own suspicions. In a flash of instinct, driven by a desire to protect himself, Grayson swiftly swapped their glasses on the bar top, a precautionary measure against Hector's possible duplicity.

'To friendship and your success,' said Hector.

They both downed their drinks in one swift motion, a false toast to a friendship poisoned by secrets and lies. Hector continued to weave his narrative, seemingly oblivious to the storm brewing within Grayson. But as seconds ticked by, a change overcame Hector. His words slowed, his smile faltering as confusion clouded his eyes, then a stark realisation. With a suddenness that left Grayson frozen,

Hector reached out for him, then collapsed, the glass slipping from his limp hand and shattering against the cold marble floor. Grayson sat motionless, shock pinning him in place as what had transpired sank in. Hector's body, was now nothing more than a reminder of the world Grayson had navigated to reach his current pinnacle.

In the solitude of his apartment, the warm embrace of the bath did little to soothe Grayson who shook from deep sobs and distress. As the steam rose, so did the realisation that there was no turning back, no recanting the steps that had led him here. His future path was one of acceptance, of embracing the mantle that fate, coupled with his own actions, had thrust upon him.

Draped in a bathrobe, lost in thought, Grayson began getting ready for an event to celebrate the success of the film. He had been asked to give an award to Christophe marking his entry into the exclusive group of film makers who could command investment and respect. Grayson was rehearsing his speech when he was startled by the ring of the doorbell. The envelope delivered into his hands was a tangible link to his father, a man whose own legacy was now as enigmatic as his disappearance. In it was notification of the financial resources left to him by his father with a note reading 'Congratulations Grayson, I knew you would do it'.

Grayson was surprised by the gesture and that a conversation from his teenage years had been held in mind by his father. 'You become a success in your creative field and I will reward you for it,' his father had said to a son who even at a young age had turned his back on joining the family business.

As Grayson navigated the ensuing years, the spectre of Hector's death never cast its shadow upon him. Questions remained unanswered, the truth obscured by the passage of time and the ever-churning gossip mills of the entertainment industry. Grayson's ascent continued, unmarred by suspicion, his star burning ever brighter in the firmament of celebrity.

LOSING THE LIGHT

Rayner Sen was lying low, scanning documents in the secluded archive room, walking to and fro from the photocopier and voluntarily cleaning out the staff fridge which was the worst of all three, and then she walked up and down the stairs visiting people at their desks just to say 'hi' and find out what they were doing, and that didn't work out too well because her colleagues were busy and also some didn't know who she was, and preferred to keep it that way. But none of this made a difference as Eric Stanton found her anyway, when she momentarily paused at her desk to collect her phone from her bag. He stood waiting for her as she peered up from under the desk, rising slowly with a withering smile.

Eric dived straight in sans the pleasantries. 'Let's not plan anything further, we have a lot of ground to cover and you are clearly not prepared to deliver what you promised,' he said, stabbing the air with his finger in Rayner's direction as if that would help her understand the precarious position they were in.

'I am doing my best, but it has been difficult to get people to notice,' said Rayner, trying to hold her ground while noticing that Eric hadn't had a manicure of late.

'Push harder, we need Nancy to be the top story ... no, the only news story by the end of the week. What is keeping you? What is the problem?' Eric was irritable when he got into work that morning and the conversation wasn't helping to alleviate that, if anything it was making things worse. As the director of a PR firm that was trying to expand, he was under pressure from the investors and board. He had also been caught cheating on his wife, there was a video, and he was being held hostage by the owner of the film to come clean even though he knew that he would never do that since his wife held all the cards when it came to their finances and would eviscerate him if she found evidence of his infidelities. Eric had a whole other problem to deal with now which was to find the person who had the film and destroy them and the evidence before it made its way to his wife, and doing his job just added to his woes.

'There are a lot of newsworthy items competing for space on social media and it is the summer ... celebrities are on holiday ... those are the pictures that are in demand,' said Rayner, hoping Eric would recognise the logic in this and let her off the hook.

'You are not telling me anything I don't know! I want her in the press by the end of the week or else the deal is over,' said Eric with a finality that made Rayner feel a wave of nausea. He crossed his arms and glared at her although his mind was elsewhere and if you asked Eric, he would tell you that he was partly taking out his personal problems on the new recruit, and it was working, it was making him feel less stressed about the precarious situation he was in with the reveal-all tape.

'What deal?'

'The deal to keep you on? You are not permanent staff Rayner. You need to prove yourself before that happens. I hope I am making myself clear.'

'I'll do my best,' mumbled Rayner as she watched Eric stride away, resisting the urge to flip him the finger, then rested her head on her cluttered desk. It was cool on her forehead, she wondered if she had a migraine coming on as the office had poor air circulation and the few fans scattered next to desk areas didn't make a difference in the rising heat of the day, plus it turned out the heating had been on maximum the night before and well into the morning because of a problem with the boiler and the building supervisor was nowhere to be found, some thought he may have quit

without telling anyone, others didn't realise there was a building supervisor.

Rayner sighed audibly. She was exhausted and had to concede she was out of her depth. She was someone who believed she could try her hand at anything and with enough commitment and practice would be able to become a pro at it. She had heard a podcast about practice and consistency being the way to master any area of your life. But now, the weight of Eric's expectation threatened to crush what remained of her hope of hanging on to a job just to meet her monthly outgoings. She knew she was running out of time and needed to act fast. Another part of her felt aggrieved that she hadn't had enough time to get to grips with the industry. She just needed time to learn and then she would fly. It didn't matter to Rayner that she had no real interest in PR, she still wanted to prove that she could do it, and more than that, excel at it.

She opened the window behind her, but it was a waste of time, there was no breeze. She peered out the window, hoping the fresh air, albeit still, would revive her and give her the boost she needed to find a way to get the celebrity, Nancy Evans, into the news cycle as requested by Eric. She knew how lucky it was for the PR firm to get the contract to manage the account for Nancy Evans, an actor unknown

until a year ago, she had broken through with a secondary role in what many called a cinematic masterpiece. The film, *L'appel du vide*, had catapulted Nancy into the limelight enabling her to break through into major projects. She was surprised on the day she met the actor, it was by accident, a senior publicist, Madeline, was supposed to attend the meeting with Eric, but called in unwell at the last minute. Within five minutes of meeting her, Nancy had asked Eric to make sure that Rayner handled her account. Eric tried but failed to convince Nancy to select a more experienced member of staff. And that was how Rayner landed one of the most coveted accounts of the company. But she was a novice and had failed to make a dent in the publicity machine to make sure Nancy remained headline news in celebrity world.

In the fashionably sparse office, decorated in white and muted greys, Rayner dwelt on the exchange with Eric and realised it was loud enough for everyone to hear, some of her colleagues smiled compassionately, others nodded as if they had been there themselves. Ben gave her a thumbs up when she glanced his way, but she thought nothing of it since Ben was as suave with contacts that were eye-wateringly influential that he refused to share with anyone, and he was the son of one of the new investors and he brought in more clients than anyone else, and if that wasn't

enough, he had boyish good looks, the requisite height, sky blue eyes and silky blonde hair - she placed him somewhere on the Nordic spectrum. Most of the junior publicists had their money on Ben replacing Eric pretty soon.

'Just get on with it,' said Madison, hopping on Rayner's desk, casting a glance back over at the others, 'You can do this, you haven't spent decades in this business, you can come up with new and fresh ideas, do something different, try anything ... keep it legal though, yah?'

'Why are you being such a cheerleader?' asked Rayner trying to hide her delight that Madison was paying her attention, given that she had a crush on Madison and had failed so far to make anything come of it because she felt overwhelmed by the work and also since she wasn't sure if Madison would be interested in her and she didn't want to be rejected, having been spurned several times of late in her attempts to begin something with eligible women she had met online. She hoped that Madison would stay longer and talk to her. She hadn't seen her in a week and had been thinking about her. Madison had long chestnut hair which she pulled into a bun and Rayner thought the loose strands and slight fringe to the front made Madison look seductive but not overly so. She did her best to sneak glances at Madison when she could, but it invariably made her feel

lightheaded and weak. She had a strong attraction to Madison but barely knew her and that was a problem.

‘You know why,’ teased Madison, nudging Rayner on the arm. ‘I like supporting the newbies, plus given enough time I just know you could come up with some excellent ideas and I want to be there when you do.’

Rayner felt touched hearing that Madison thought highly of her. She also wondered how to keep Madison with her for a little longer. ‘Maybe we could grab a coffee and I could tell you the ideas I have for Nancy Evans? It would be great to have your take on them?’

Madison, glanced at her phone and then back at Rayner, ‘Erm .. sure, well maybe, let’s see how the day goes.’ Madison tapped the notebook on her desk ‘Get it done!’ she said hurrying off.

Rayner felt her smile vanish but decided that Madison must be busy and it was no indication of her interest in her.

Rayner got the job as a junior publicist by exaggerating her achievements. It was not unheard of, difficult job markets and relentless competition often pushed people to embellish the truth Rayner had told herself at the time. She never considered PR as a job option but she hadn’t been

able to secure an interview for anything else. If asked, she would tell you she never had a burning ambition to work in a particular industry so she just went where there was a job opening. Rayner loved to swim and for a while thought about working in sports science, but that fell by the wayside when she was eventually accepted on a highly regarded programme to study art. That was something she was good at - creative design and portraiture, but she was unsuccessful at securing a position that enabled her to pursue either while making a living. Her parents hoped she would eventually find something to tide her over but they were unable to help her although they had contributed to her studies and rent as best they could. But with their divorce, both were preoccupied and unable to give her the time she needed. It was her sister, Jasmine, who introduced her to Eric Stanton, the director of the company. She was interviewed over a cup of coffee and croissant and offered the job after ten minutes of chat. It later transpired that Eric was interested in her sister and considered the favour a way to progress that goal of getting to know Jasmine better. But Jasmine wasn't interested and worse disliked Eric and had only stepped in because she was worried about Rayner, which had clearly got back to Eric who after a week of being easy to work for had changed his behaviour significantly, making demands and reprimanding Rayner in front of everyone. Jasmine had backed away from the whole

fiasco at this point and had chosen to leave the country for a stint working in Europe with her partner, the popularity of digital nomadism had captured their hearts and minds, sadly Rayner was not invited to join them, although on thinking about it she probably would have stuck it out where she was even if she had been invited since she wanted to be able to visit her parents and was concerned about the dissolution of their once happy union.

Eric had recently brought in a mix of clients who wanted to keep their actors on the circulation of social media and celebrity sites. They also needed to keep some people off those sites, especially those who had fallen by the wayside due to some transgression - major, minor, unproven, proven - it didn't matter, once there was any hint of character flaw and controversy companies and advertisers would voice their concern about the reputational cost so those people were shut down. Eric's firm was then charged with making sure any remaining support for the fallen stars from fans or the public was eliminated - out of sight, out of mind so to speak. Sometimes it took more than one attempt to shut down the media about the person who had fallen from grace because of their body of work and sometimes because of how wide their support could be, especially for those with a global reach, but Eric knew just how merciless he needed to be and was known for being able to cancel

the offender effectively and with maximum impact. There were some in the industry who were weary of him based on this reputation and it was partly the reason he was headhunted for his current job. The propensity for the fast paced news cycle to seek out offences, however minor, and inflate them to the point of generating vitriol and outrage across social media platforms had become a media specialism in its own right and Eric had designed some of the most lethal and underhanded campaigns. For Eric the public were fickle and busy enough to forget about their fallen favourites and move on to the next best thing - especially if they were marketed as such.

When Rayner joined the company she knew nothing about PR. Funnily she even expected to be inducted into her role. Instead, on her first day she was sent to meet the agent of a rising star in the theatre to discuss scheduling and ensure that the information would get out to the requisite press, fans and influencers so there would be images of the person in the most pertinent spaces in time for his theatrical debut. On meeting the agent, Rayner felt a queasiness she hadn't felt since her second year in secondary school when she sat next to Suzy in biology and Suzy sliced open a frog rather too enthusiastically, with the innards landing with a splat on Rayner's nose. The agent put his hand on Rayner's knee and asked her if she had

considered an acting career. Rayner lifted his hand off her knee, placed it on the agent's knee and politely said 'No'. Rayner shuddered recalling the meeting and having to touch the man's hand. At the time she was grateful she carried hand gel where ever she went. When she spoke to Eric about the incident he rolled his eyes, not once but twice.

Rayner made herself a strong coffee and decided to plan her next move. She could work on a narrative that was different to the traditional and get the client, Nancy Evans, to show up at an event unrelated to her current role. Nancy was starring in a political thriller directed by a rising talent who had made their name making inexpensive horror movies that landed up being box office gold. After the excitement over the film *L'appel du vide* died down, Nancy rarely appeared in public and took to wearing disguises when she did venture out - most did not recognise her. There was also no gossip about her, she hadn't been seen out with anyone famous, notorious or gorgeous.

Which is why Rayner thought that putting Nancy in a situation that was picked up by the general news may be the best bet and perhaps from there celebrity news outlets would cover it. She started sketching out a plan, a campaign that would weave the celebrity's presence into

daily conversations, not through sheer visibility but through relatability and possibly intrigue. Rayner's thoughts were interrupted by a notification on her computer. An email from Eric, subject line 'Opportunity'. It was a brief message, mentioning a meeting with, Oscar Lake, an actor whose career was teetering on the edge of oblivion after a scandal that had been covered by every single news outlet across the world. Eric saw it as a low-priority case, a side project for Rayner to maximise her worth for the money he was paying her.

Rayner had a propensity to upend common thinking to see if it led to a deeper understanding of the motivations of people. According to her, the public's attention was fleeting because it was about giving them something they needed to distract them from their own lives. Sometimes they pushed that distraction to the limit, thinking about a particular celebrity more than their own loved ones and imagining they would meet the person and somehow navigate themselves into their lives and social media had opened that up as a possibility with access to the accounts of famous people and the ability to send them a message directly. Because of this increased access to people across social strata, stories often got exaggerated and sometimes were unchecked so media outlets could grab attention, beat the competition and get more revenue from

advertisers or perhaps it was excitement all round with journalists just as enthused about easy access to celebrity photos and visuals of their intimate lives, especially when celebrities posted images of their homes, children, dogs, cats, family, friends and other celebrities. It was possible that they did this to show they were just like everyone else although that in itself was ridiculous given they lived very different lives from the average person thought Rayner.

This was the way Rayner approached PR, through a lens that was sceptical as much as optimistic. She had read Ed Bernay's book 'Propaganda' in the first year of university and used it as the foundation for her prize winning second year project on art, culture and influence. She knew stories had the power to shift perceptions, to kindle empathy, to cast uncertainty, to resurrect fallen stars, to launch unnecessary products on a flagging market and to bring surprises of success where once there was just the predictably of marketing and forecasting. If she could craft a narrative that showed the celebrity Oscar Lake as a person with struggles and who was seeking redemption, maybe she could turn the tide and reestablish him as a figure worth rooting for. Rayner leaned towards rehabilitation rather than persecution when it came to most things, although she was always open to debate about her views for fear that she didn't know enough to make the kind of decisions and

choices she would need to. She would rise to the challenge she thought, finding the precarious situation Oscar Lake found himself in far more interesting than working on the publicity for Nancy Evans. She wondered if she could hand over the latter account to someone else, but Eric had left by the time she had thought about it and so she decided to press on with both pieces of work. How bad could it be she wondered?

She spent the night diving into the depths of social media, trying to understand Oscar Lake's public image, and the nature of the scandal. The more she learned, the more she saw the inconsistencies behind the headlines, the uniformity of reporting which veered on what she considered laziness and a lack of thorough investigative work as to the transgressions Oscar Lake was accused of, shamed and internet-judged over. She wasn't sure about the potential for a comeback because of the level of interest that the story had generated. It had crossed over from obscure celebrity sites, to mainstream celebrity news sites to the broadsheets to prime time television news.

By morning, Rayner had a blueprint. She felt it was ambitious, blending traditional PR tactics with a grassroots social media campaign, highlighting the celebrity's journey towards making amends, their involvement in community

projects, and a series of candid interviews. In reality all her ideas could be plotted against the reputational repair rhetoric model and if you asked her she would have agreed, because no matter how hard she tried to come up with something unique, she was stuck with the PR tools available. And yet, she wanted the world to see the person behind the persona, to understand, to empathise enough to offer the opportunity for rehabilitation if needed or a new direction in their career options.

Eric was more than sceptical about Rayner's grand plan but he was also distracted by a second message he had received from the person demanding that he confess all to his wife. Eric had offered the person money but they had sent him back a message that read 'Ha, ha, just tell her.' At this point Eric wasn't entirely sure which mistress it was he had been filmed with. Frustrated, he decided to put a pin in it and consider Rayner's work.

'Okay, tell me about your idea again, go through it slowly,' said Eric, watching Rayner closely, as he felt that pressure brought out the best in people, sometimes the worst, but mainly the best.

'I'm bringing the Nancy Evans project together with the Oscar Lake one. One celebrity on the rise with a new film

with press junkets scheduled and the other down on their luck looking for entry back into the world of showbiz,' smiled Rayner, hoping Eric would understand the brilliance of her idea with just the summary, as she had yet to work out the details and she hadn't slept so her judgement may not have been the best, but she was certain her plan would work.

'This is risky, it could tank Nancy Evans entirely and her agent and the film executives will be out for blood, and by that I mean yours, mine and our company's. But I am intrigued and there is a possibility it could work if there are no new revelations about Oscar Lake ... Are there?' asked Eric sipping his second cup of coffee and rotating his wedding ring.

Rayner provided a few more details about what she was considering and noticed Eric's glazed expression. She waited for his response and noticed that he had green eyes that seemed to have flecks of amber in them. 'Eric? Shall I repeat that?'

Eric looked up and shook his head. 'So, your plan is to bring both these people together, ostensibly by accident at a charitable cause. One benefits from the notoriety of being photographed by someone who is on the way out and has

been underground for months, so the press will want the picture anyway, and the other benefits from being at a charitable cause, meeting a new star and taking time out of their soon to be over life just to support a charity,' said Eric. He wanted to laugh but also wondered if the fall out could be huge enough to warrant its own headlines. Eric wondered if he was in the right frame of mind to manage the situation given his emotions were spinning out of control for fear about a confrontation with his wife.

'And the charity event they will be attending is for rescue animals - dogs and cats,' said Rayner. Biting her lips, reconsidering her plan and wondering how many coffees she had had the night before to come up with it. Both celebrities would be there by accident, although she would somehow leak it to the press, and if asked neither of them would need to say much as they were both headed there but not together. How bad could it be thought Rayner? Would Nancy even tolerate being in the same venue as Oscar? Would it upset the animals if there was a fight? How many photographers would show up?

'It's always good to have soothing animals in the scene. Everyone loves a puppy. Right? Make sure it's not just downtrodden dogs and cats with moth-eaten fur in the photos,' said Eric, remembering that he hated both cats and

dogs. He sat back in his chair and swivelled right round. 'So, Nancy and Oscar will show up without a clue that the other will be there ... it's a long shot, but if you pull this off it could be game-changer, not just for them, but for us.'

'Perhaps I should check with Madeline or even Ben? Just to hear their take on it,' said Rayner, pushing back her short dark hair which she now realised she hadn't styled that morning and she was wearing the same outfit as the previous day.

Eric leaned in and stared at her for a while. Then he rose and shut his office door, sitting down again. 'Look Rayner, keep this between just the two of us. Ben and Madeline ... erm ... let's just say I would prefer this to be a project that succeeds under my watch. Are we clear?' he finished, mock zipping his lips. 'We are all under pressure, I need my job and as long as I'm in charge you'll have one too. Okay?'

Rayner nodded and asked for the rest of the day off to find a suitable charity and contact the celebrities. Eric watched her leave and slumped back in his chair, squeezing a stress ball. He had worked in the industry long enough to know that his job was always at risk. He knew that both Ben and Madeline were his immediate competitors and since Rayner was new he chose her as his confidante, plus he was certain

she needed to hold on to the job and was naive enough to get on with whatever plan she had. He needed to make sure he impressed not just the board but future employers and he had been considering shifting the way he approached difficult projects for a while.

These days his work had become all or nothing, with the rapid departure of current media darlings as soon as someone new with a slight edge came along and for companies it was all about the advertising and hooking consumers who now had attention spans of the average goldfish. They were easily distracted by the next shiny thing and it had become addictive. He had been sucked into the incessant rapid media loop and demand for the next big crisis, drama and photogenic couple. Before the week was up, the public lost interest and there was a rush to produce someone else. There were few people in the public eye who could hold interest for long without carefully crafted round the clock publicity gurus and communication geniuses. And it only took one slip up, a celebrity tanked up on some upper to shoot off a message on social media without checking first, for their entire career to crumble in less than a second. Eric didn't need that for Nancy Evans. He saw mileage in her career pulling the firm along under his watch. He had already lined up endorsements and was in talks about a cosmetics line.

As for Oscar Lake, Eric had kept his distance since news broke about him, but he still considered Oscar bankable, he had marketable looks that were hard to find and he hadn't gone under the knife for them. He had a good range of work behind him and if Rayner succeeded in shifting the dial somehow, there could still be many good years left. But Eric couldn't be sure and the more he thought about what lay in front of him, the worse he felt. Just then he received another text message 'You have one week to tell your wife or I will send her the video.' Eric knew he needed a distraction so he left work and headed for a bar.

The charity Rayner chose had just been established on the back of the squeeze on public funding and inflationary pressures that caused the price of food and necessities to spiral. It was located in what once was a bustling arts quarter which had been affected by the economic downturn. The area was in desperate need of regeneration and when Rayner approached the charity they were happy to open their doors to publicity and celebrity endorsement. They were receiving more dogs, cats, hamsters and rabbits now because people abandoned them unable to cover the cost of their care and upkeep in the worsening financial climate.

The charity had been set up by an artist and her daughter in what was previously a large art gallery. The volunteers and funders were mainly the artists who remained working in the area and they had converted the building into a no-kill shelter providing a second chance at life for the animals.

Rayner came away from her visit motivated to get the project going. She just needed to convince Nancy and Oscar to come along to celebrate the first year anniversary of the place. She wanted the overarching narrative to be one of transformation and new beginnings which was something that could be used to cast Oscar Lake in a new light and also benefit Nancy Evans by broadening her appeal beyond arthouse chic.

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A dream unfolds. He is crouching with his back against grey rocks on a ledge high above the ocean. The undulating sea rises up, the waves catching the light as they smash against the jagged rocks. He struggles, pushes back against the edge, his back pressing deeper into the rocks. His foot slips and the ledge loosens, debris falling down below. The sun burns his patchy red skin, the pain is excruciating, like pins dragged against his arms, legs and face. The ledge crumbles with a mighty growl taking him with it, he cries

out falling fast, his eyes focussed on the rocky mass below, the sea rising higher and higher, a frothy wave catches him, pulls him into the dark blue depths of the ocean.

'Arghh!' screamed Oscar, waking up suddenly, his heart pounding. He pushed himself up and checked his surroundings. He was lying on a deckchair in his garden by his serene swimming pool. He sighed with relief. He rubbed his face briskly to rouse himself and automatically reached for a can in the cooler next to him, popping the top and taking a drink. His hair, unkempt and tousled, hung loosely around his face. The sunlight, unyielding and bright, bathed his skin in a glow that accentuated the uneven stubble and the weary contours of his face, which still held traces of its attractive allure. His deep blue eyes were thoughtful and suffused with a quiet sadness. Beside him, the remnants of last night's solace—a cooler with an assortment of alcoholic beverages, surrounded by empty cans and takeaway cartons.

Oscar reached for his phone to switch it off. The dings were incessant. Messages from an assortment of numbers he did not recognise - someone had leaked his private number. It was the one he used for family and friends only. He growled, hurling the phone into the pool. Then he drained his can and crumpled it, lobbing it behind him.

'Got it!' came a voice, tousling his hair.

Oscar looked up and for the first time in a long time smiled warmly. 'Should I welcome you home?' he laughed, rising and giving his son Josh a long, tender hug.

Josh tossed the can down with the rest of the debris from the night before and sighed. He placed his suitcase and holdall to the side. 'Dad, I've missed you,' he drew Oscar in for another hug, masking his distress at the sight of his father's decline.

He drew up a chair, 'I'm here, Dad, for as long as it takes.'

Oscar felt himself shift, he hadn't acknowledged how isolated he had become, Josh's words brought tears to his eyes. 'You don't need to do this son, it's not the best of times and you have your studies.' Oscar was proud of his son and his achievements and had kept him away from his problems, sending him messages and letting him know he was fine. He didn't want his son embroiled in any of the saga that had unfolded and was continuing to do so. He was just hopeful his son didn't think less of him.

Josh was glad to see his father, he had been worried about him and would have come sooner but had to make arrangements to manage his studies. He wanted to get

things going quickly now to prevent his father from declining further. He placed a hand on his father's shoulder, 'Listen Dad, I've booked you in for a detox and I'm staying here with you. Then we'll go for your meetings together and get things back on track.'

Oscar shook his head, wiping away his tears. 'You can't do this, there are better things to do with your time and I promise, I will get ...'

'You helped me when I came out, found out about who I am, joined parents groups ... heck you always come to Pride and speak up whenever you can at queer events,' said Josh.

'You are my son, I would do that anyway.'

'I know Dad, and I appreciate it, but that's just an example of how we support each other when we can and now we need to focus on you just for a while.'

'I ... I always worry for your safety, I do what I can ...,' Oscar wanted to stop rambling, he didn't want his son knowing about the depth of his fears when his son was out of his sight. Letting go of Josh so he could explore and find friends after he came out at school was a constant worry for Oscar which worsened as Josh aged, especially with the attacks on the queer community and the relentless push to

limit discussions about civil rights. He wanted to be there for his son and not just when it suited him. He looked around and saw what Josh saw. He had let things slip and was running out of time to get himself back together. He couldn't possibly support Josh with anything in his current state.

'How are things at your grandfather's?' asked Oscar, changing the subject, and buttoning up his shirt.

'I'd rather be here, he's a lot more conventional than you plus he believes all that stuff on the internet about you! I'm further away from college but I'll manage.'

'I'm sorry. Are you being teased ... bullied ... because of all the press about me?' asked Oscar sadly.

'Nah! Your stuff is mild compared to what my friend's parents do. You know like lock their kid out of the house because they are trans, send their kid to a preacher to convert them to heterosexuality, ban books ... the list is growing Dad! Your historical fantasies and private messages on the internet mean nothing - not to me. It shouldn't do to anyone else either - you have a right to a private life Dad ... plus it was while you were in college!' said Josh with a frown, 'Article eight of the UN Declaration of Human Rights

is about privacy and we all have a right to that,' said Josh, patting his father's arm.

'Glad you are learning something on your course,' smiled Oscar proudly, automatically cracking open another beer and resting back on the lounge chair.

Josh grabbed the can from him, 'Dad if you want to drink yourself into oblivion and self-destruct fine, just make sure it's because you choose to do that and not because of what mum did to you.'

'I'm over your mum leaving Josh that was a while ago. I don't expect her to stand by me now,' said Oscar.

'Not that! Giving your emails and all that stuff you wrote to the press,' said Josh, surprised at his father's lack of knowledge.

'What?!' Oscar's exclamation echoed with surprise and dread. His mind raced at the fear of what else his ex-wife might have in her arsenal. The stakes were suddenly higher, much higher than he imagined. He had met his ex-wife when they were studying and they had been together until a year ago when she finally had enough of his indiscretions, but he hadn't realised that she would still have access to any of his online accounts or that she would want to share

any of that information given it would not benefit her as the divorce had been finalised and what he had written was when he was at college.

Josh, sensing his father's turmoil, leaned in closer, 'Dad, we'll deal with it. Together. You're not alone ... I doubt there is much more that can be released to the press do you? I think people are saturated with what is already out there.'

Oscar took a deep breath, the gravity of the situation pressing down on him, but in an odd way he felt better knowing the source of the leak. He felt less under siege considering who he was up against, although given the scale of the information out there, he was inclined to agree with Josh, he doubted there was anything else that his ex-wife had to share.

Rayner had decided to approach Nancy Evans first, mainly because Oscar Lake hadn't returned her calls or emails. She figured that he would be a much harder sell and she wasn't even sure if he was up to facing the public. She put her concerns to the side and made her way into a local bistro where she had arranged to meet Nancy. The place buzzed with the quiet chatter of its patrons, a soft jazz tune playing in the background providing a calming soundtrack. Nancy

showed up in large dark glasses that overwhelmed her petite features, jeans and a crisp white t-shirt, twinned with glossy black heels. She had a large bag on one shoulder and a Yorkshire Terrier in the other. Rayner motioned for her to come over.

Nancy sat opposite Rayner in the circular booth, then shuffled closer to the middle. She took a small pillow out of her bag and placed her dog on top of it, giving it a small treat. 'This is Coco', she said, 'She likes her Chanel,' she added, pointing to the diamond encrusted collar with a quick smile. She stroked Coco and had a few loving words with her before turning to Rayner, her smile and soft voice gone, 'Now, what was the urgency of interrupting our day?'

Rayner launched into her idea for the event at the charity for homeless animals. She decided to wind up her pitch quickly 'I'll get the specifics to you as soon as I can, but it would be such a great opportunity for you, especially with Coco too - the public will love it, really, I can feel how great it is going to be and we really need to get you in some of the celebrity sites as soon as possible especially with your new film on the horizon.' Rayner rested back, taking in a deep breath, recognising that she was far from calm and that she had become more anxious as she spoke because of Nancy's obvious lack of enthusiasm.

'No, it won't be appropriate. I need maximum impact coverage if I go anywhere at all. I mean, how did you come up with this? Was it Eric's idea?', Nancy rolled her eyes, 'Is it because my new film features dogs? It's just two scenes!' Nancy patted Coco who was looking fearful hearing her raised voice. Nancy felt disappointed and unhappy about Rayner's proposal especially since it meant travelling to a rather underwhelming part of the city. Her life had changed, surely she no longer needed to pander to people in this way. She also wondered if she would need to get any jobs before coming in contact with homeless animals.

Rayner understood Nancy's reluctance, recognising her desire for more glamorous associations than a charity event. 'It might seem understated, but its impact is far-reaching. The event is pivotal for community regeneration and highlights the indispensable role of local artists, especially given the recent economic challenges,' Rayner elaborated, weaving a narrative that positioned the event as not just philanthropic but socially and politically relevant. She kept her hands under the table and her fingers crossed. 'Moreover, politicians and press will be attending, drawn to the unique blend of community action and high-profile support. And there's more – Brix, the designer who stole the spotlight at the Paris catwalks will be there. He's a fervent animal lover and a local boy made good. Meeting him could

open doors to potential endorsements in Europe.’ Rayner pulled this out of the air and wondered if she was finally getting the hang of her job. She made a note to contact Brix and get him to attend. She wasn’t sure what temptation she would need to throw in his direction - perhaps Nancy wearing one of his creations for the premier of her film.

Nancy’s interest was piqued. The promise of press coverage and the opportunity to rub shoulders with a celebrated designer was something that made a short visit to the animal sanctuary doable. ‘Send me all the details and I’ll get back to you’, she said, her tone non-committal but noticeably warmer. She gathered Coco in her arms.

‘Just, before you go Nancy, can you tell me why you specifically requested me to work on your portfolio?’ asked Rayner walking with Nancy to the exit, pushing her hands deep into her front pockets. She wondered if she was imagining it, but she thought she saw a sharp intake of breath from Nancy and a quick once over of Rayner. It made Rayner blush. Nancy moved closer and leant in, whispering in her ear, ‘Just do what I ask sweetie,’ she said with a small smile, leaving Rayner with more questions than answers.

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Eric was glad to see a photo in a popular gossip site of Nancy Evans and her dog leaving a bistro. The article hypothesised about her meeting someone to discuss a new project and also provided links for readers on where to get her outfit. There was even a note about the dog collar which garnered a greater number of comments and likes than the rest of the photos. Eric sent a message to Rayner encouraging her to continue. He scrolled through the feed on his phone and lay on his bed, occasionally glancing at his wife, Cassandra, who was getting ready for a society engagement. She looked pristine and highly polished as if she had fallen out of a glossy magazine. She took such care with her image he thought, if only he could get her to share her secrets with some of the people he had to represent. His phone buzzed - a message that read 'Countdown - three days left.' Eric responded back swiftly: 'Drop dead.' He didn't want to capitulate to the demands of the person with the video. He hadn't seen it and had almost convinced himself that it didn't exist and this was probably just someone having a bit of fun at his expense perhaps it was someone he had slept with and discarded or maybe an old college friend who was just playing a game.

'I'm going to be late this evening,' said Cassandra, looking at Eric disapprovingly. She had told him to look presentable even while at home but here he was in black joggers, socks

still on and a white vest that had seen better days. His hair was tousled and he hadn't bothered to shave.

'Are you on leave this week,' she enquired, sitting on the bed, placing her elegant hand on his chest.

'No, I'm just doing some work at home,' said Eric, placing a hand on top of hers. His phone buzzed.

'Someone want you?' asked Cassandra reaching for his phone. Eric grabbed it and raised himself off the bed quickly. 'I have work to do,' he said, giving her a peck on the cheek and making his way to the study before she could ask him about his message.

Once he heard Cassandra leave, he looked at his phone. The message read 'Be a good boy and just do as you are told.' Eric had spent the afternoon calling a list of people he had annoyed, harmed in some way or whose career he had destroyed. Of course he didn't expect anyone to confess but he thought he'd be able to pick up a hint of guilt in the voice of the right person. But his time was wasted and he hadn't enjoyed the vitriol that emanated from some of those he called. He poured himself a scotch and settled in for the evening, hoping to come up with some ideas on what to do next. He was unwilling to fess up to Cassandra and more importantly, he didn't want to loose what they had,

especially the house, his cars, the golf membership and all the other perks that came with the life he had with her.

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Madeline downed her shot and signalled for another round. She looked over at Rayner, 'I'm glad you agreed to meet. I know it's late.'

Rayner shook her head 'I was still in the office anyway, so it didn't matter.' She was surprised to get a call from Madeline, and while she was busy, she dashed out of the office genuinely happy that Madeline had asked to see her. She hoped that this was the chance for her to explore the possibility of asking Madeline out on a date.

When she arrived she saw that Madeline had her hair down and was dressed in a short black dress. She had on heavy make up, which was surprisingly flattering on her and looked like she was going out for an event. But on questioning, she said she had changed her mind about going to the theatre with a friend and wanted to see Rayner instead. Rayner noticed that she was slurring her words and felt a wave of disappointment. This was not what she was expecting because it looked like Madeline must have had a date that had cancelled on her and she came to a bar to get drunk and perhaps dialled a number of friends, none of

whom were available late on a work night and her last option was Rayner. She felt fairly certain that was the sequence of events and chided herself for getting hopeful and rushing over.

'How's your work with Nancy Evans going?' Madeline asked, downing another shot.

Rayner remembered what Eric had said and reminded herself not to reveal anything to Madeline although she really wanted to and felt it could help with the event she was putting on. Then again she wondered if this was the right time given that Madeline seemed to be even more inebriated than she first thought.

'It's okay. I'm doing bits here and there, nothing has really stuck though, I think it's because she keeps a low profile and it has been deliberate ... she wants to build some intrigue, it may even be related to the content of the new film,' said Rayner, feeling guilty about not telling Madeline the truth about the event she had planned. Did it matter? Rayner didn't think Madeline was the kind of person to usurp Eric. Ben was a more likely candidate for doing something like that and more likely to succeed, given the composition of the board.

'Do you know what Eric told me my second month into the job?' asked Madeline, laughing unhappily, dragging her chair closer into the table.

'What did he say?'

'We create the stars, we can dim them, and sometimes, we need to reignite them. That's what he said to me,' said Madeline.

'What if he makes a mistake and dims the wrong person?' asked Rayner.

'I know, right? It made me reconsider working in the sector. But I stayed on, more out of necessity than love.'

'What do you really want to do?'

'Maybe something in HR,' said Madeline distractedly.

Rayner raised an eyebrow. How close were the principles of HR and PR she wondered, but not out loud. She also tried to hide her disappointment - another of her assumptions was that Madeline was creative like her and would walk away from PR for something more artistic and nourishing. Rayner considered her propensity to make assumptions quickly, then she decided to cut herself a break since she had a

crush on Madeline and it was what people did when they had crushes.

‘So, what about Oscar Lake?’ asked Madeline.

Rayner had expected something other than work talk when Madeline asked her out for a late drink. Now she realised that this wasn’t a way to get to know her, but rather perhaps a way of getting information out of her. Rayner questioned if Madeline was upset that Nancy Evans had requested her to handle the work. That must have been considered embarrassing given she was much more senior than Rayner. This was something she hadn’t considered before because she hadn’t a contentious thought about Madeline, and all she could think of was kissing those lips and running her hands through Madeline’s long hair, although at that very moment, it wasn’t an appealing thought because Rayner was getting to see Madeline in a different light and perhaps consider who she really was and her physical attractiveness was giving way to the reality of her views.

‘How do you know about Oscar Lake?’ asked Rayner.

‘Oh, you hear things in the office,’ said Madeline, finishing her drink. ‘Don’t want to talk about it?’ she asked, reaching for Rayner’s hand across the table and attempting to interlock her fingers with Rayner’s.

Rayner pulled her hand away, feeling confused and unsettled 'What is this about Madeline?'

'Oh, grow up!' Madeline shot angrily. 'This is business. You took Nancy Evans from me and Eric has shut me out of meetings ... I'm too tired to flirt with you to get what I want so just tell me, what does he have you working on?'

Frustrated and upset, and suddenly close to tears, Rayner left the bar, not looking back.

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'Dad, something has arrived for you, I'll just leave it out here,' said Josh, walking out to the pool, surprised to find his father already there and speaking to Rayner. After they were introduced, Josh decided to sit in on the conversation, concerned that a PR firm were going to manage his father's come back, and even more concerned to learn that the person in charge was someone who had worked in PR for less than two months.

Oscar opened the package that Josh had brought with him. It contained a phone and nothing else. He switched it on and a video started playing. Oscar's eyes widened, then he frowned. The sounds of love making between Eric and a mystery woman were audible enough for Rayner and Josh

to hear. At the end of the short clip there was a message that said 'Use this to get your life back.'

Oscar, Josh and Rayner sat in silence, all equally perplexed by the video and the contents.

'This will end Eric ... ', said Rayner.

'He might go up in the estimation of PR professionals,' said Josh.

'Whatever the case, I'm not getting involved with this,' Oscar said. 'Everyone has something on someone in this industry ... I need to get out. Might as well do it now, most doors are shut to me anyway.'

'Dad, it's still important for you to address what happened and stand your ground,' said Josh, 'Otherwise it'll look like you've been defeated by a bunch of old messages and emails!'

'We can't remove the articles about what is already out there! And what about all the discussion forums that have been taking every word apart and making a mockery of me. It's going to remain out there Josh, what do you expect me to do?' This was the first time Oscar had voiced these

thoughts out loud and now he had, he realised just how intractable the situation actually was.

'You still have fans and supporters,' said Josh, rubbing his palms together, feeling more unhappy by the minute and realising he hadn't considered the full gravity of what had been weighing on his father.

'I think we need to go ahead with the charity event. Even if you decide to walk away, at least we need to ensure there is something out there that counteracts what has happened. It's also a chance to show your supporters that you are fine and still doing good work as a human being,' said Rayner, feeling miserable and overwhelmed by the scale of revelations, and like Josh, just beginning to realise the momentous task ahead. Then she wondered if she should put in a call to Eric and just tell him about the phone evidence. She wasn't comfortable keeping things from him or anyone else. She also wondered if Madeline had made it home alright and whether she would feel differently seeing her in the cold light of day. She had sent her a text in the morning to find out if she was alright but hadn't heard anything.

'I'll accompany my father to the event,' said Josh firmly, 'Perhaps we could adopt a dog Dad? How about that? This

place has been pretty empty since mum left and took Pete with her. I barely get to see him now she's moved across the country.'

'I know you miss Pete. He was a good dog,' said Oscar.

Rayner looked from father to son and then back again. 'Your presence at the animal shelter indirectly signals your commitment to doing something good for someone else, it challenges the current narrative about you in the press,' said Rayner. 'I was also hoping you would speak to a supportive journalist about your experience through all this. It could help others who may be in a similar position to yourself. It could help people consider the fact that none of us are bastions of virtue and we all make mistakes.'

Rayner considered what she said to Oscar to her experience with Madeline - perhaps she should be more forgiving, after all Madeline had been drunk and was having a difficult time at work. Rayner tried to focus, but her thoughts kept bringing everything that was being said back to her and Madeline.

Josh waved his hand in front of Rayner to get her attention. 'You know my Dad hasn't done something unlawful right? He just wrote that stuff when he was in college and more than likely high and drunk. Who hasn't written crazy,

obscure stuff in college - most do it sober and well into old age,' said Josh.

Oscar eyed Rayner, perceiving someone young and out of her depth. He was fairly certain working in the sector wasn't her first choice. 'Don't you think it will look manufactured? A cynical attempt to detract from what has been said about me in the press. Hey everyone, look, Oscar is holding a puppy! He must be a good guy after all.'

'Perhaps some may say that, but others will see you and your son adopt an animal that desperately needs a home and support a struggling shelter. That could resonate for you and it seems like it is something you believe in anyway,' said Rayner. She hadn't expected to find Oscar so easy to talk to. When she left Oscar and Josh, she felt sad and disheartened, more so than she had been in a while.

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Eric sat in his car outside his home. Rayner had given him the phone with the video and explained that Oscar wanted nothing to do with it and Rayner wished Eric luck before hurriedly departing for a meeting with journalists who she hoped would be sympathetic to the charity event and Oscar's predicament. She was embarrassed for Eric and like Oscar, didn't want anything to do with video and the

potential fall out from it. Eric saw that in her eyes and gave her a wave as she left.

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‘Are you coming in Eric?’ asked Cassandra, knuckles rapping on the car window.

Eric stepped out and leant in for a kiss. She leaned back, ‘Public displays of affection are beneath us Eric.’

He was stung by the emotional gulf between them and decided to give in, he wanted out. He handed her the phone with the incriminating evidence. ‘I had an affair. It’s been caught on video. I don’t think I’ll bother coming indoors. I’m sorry,’ he said. He couldn’t see her reaction behind her large dark glasses.

‘Don’t be ridiculous Eric. We need to sort this out. I won’t have our marriage rocked by scandal and a divorce is out of the question. I have an impeccable social reputation to preserve,’ she said, placing her hand firmly on his back and shoving him indoors.

‘I’ll need to resign my position at the company,’ said Eric, sitting on the edge of the living room sofa, head in his

hands, a tremble in his voice. He felt a chill in him and a sinking feeling that he wished would stop.

'Oh, God! Don't be dramatic. Just stay put ... and take your shoes off before lying on the sofa,' said Cassandra, taking her phone with her to the study and locking the door firmly. She was busy for the next hour thanking her hires and paying them for a job well done - filming Eric and his mistress, following him and putting the scares on him. She could hardly contain her happiness at having come up with the plan, although she was annoyed at the cost and decided to make Eric pay for it by suggesting he do extra hours at work and go for a promotion.

Later that afternoon a journalist sat in the kitchen interviewing Eric and Cassandra for a luxury lifestyle magazine in which Cassandra proudly said that she and Eric were going to be renewing their marital vows in the summer, that he was planning to make a significant leap in his career and that her fifth lifestyle book was being published. She clutched his hands in both of hers and smiled brightly. The journalist was overwhelmed by the love on display and the photographer took a large number of pictures for the article. Eric stuck to the script he had been provided by his wife and never wavered from it. He was stunned that she hadn't turfed him out of the house and set

fire to his things. He was also in awe at her crisis management and when he asked her later how she managed to get everything done, she hushed him up and told him she was not about to share that with him given he had proved he was a liar and it would take her some time to trust him again.

‘Typical that it is I who has been left to clean up *your* mess and make sure everything disappears, including this dreadful evidence,’ said Cassandra managing to frown angrily although she was laughing on the inside and happier than she had been in a while. She handed Eric her pearl necklace and he dutifully did the clasp up for her.

‘Now, let’s have a look at you, that tie won’t do for tonight,’ she said selecting another and flinging it in his direction. ‘Put this on and meet me in the car. I don’t want to be late for the gala,’ she said, checking her make up in the mirror once more.

Eric observed himself in the mirror as he put on the tie. He felt external to his body, a stranger looking on at what he had become. He felt numb and caged with no where to go. Who was he now? He wasn’t entirely sure. He remembered how much he owed Cassandra and realised now he was even more in her debt. He wondered whether what he really

should have done was pressed for a divorce. Would he be able to live without his comforts and luxuries? He knew Cassandra would take everything including his job. As he joined her in the car, heading to the gala with a practiced smile plastered on his face, Eric couldn't help but wonder about the road not taken.

'Just don't,' said Cassandra, putting the car into reverse.

'What? I'm just sitting here darling,' said Eric confused.

'I know what you are thinking Eric. Being penniless will be the least of your worries if you decide to file for divorce, I can promise you that,' said Sandra through a strained smile.

Eric caught a cold glint of menace that flashed in her eyes. He nodded and mouthed 'Okay'.

'Good. Tonight at the gala I'll be making a short but significant announcement about renewing our vows. I want us to be on the front of the society pages tomorrow.'

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It was a warm and bright day with a slight breeze. Rayner arrived at the rescue centre early with a box brimming with badges, tote bags and t-shirts made to support the charity.

She thought that it could be something that the charity could benefit from if fans and the public attended in the numbers she hoped. She noticed a swell of people already in place at the front of the centre behind the low barricades. She couldn't help but feel a mix of anticipation and dread.

As Oscar and Josh arrived, they were greeted by Brix, the fashion designer who had grown up in the area. Dressed in striking black offset by bold red boots, his dark glasses hiding the gleam of excitement in his eyes, he enveloped both father and son in a generous embrace. 'This is the moment that matters,' he declared, his voice a vibrant echo amidst the flurry of camera flashes and eager fans pushing gently against the barriers. There were security in place called in by Rayner at the last minute because the number of people were way over estimation and she was glad that they were there. She had put out messages on different social media platforms and cryptic clues on fan sites and forums, but she hadn't expected the strong numbers that had turned out and within an hour all the charity merchandise had sold out.

Oscar, in response to the clamour of questions, remained a figure of calm stoicism. He cleared his throat, addressing the gathering with a prepared statement that bore the

weight of his recent seclusion. 'All I can say is that the emails that were published were from a time when I was in college and they are not recent. I hope to move on from this and rebuild my life...!' His voice, though steady, carried an undercurrent of vulnerability, a silent plea for understanding. The journalists present yelled out for more details and asked about his current life, loves and career. The crowd's reaction was a mix of curiosity and excitement at seeing him. Their attention was brief as Nancy Evans had arrived. There were loud cheers and excited screams when she climbed out of an immense black SUV. She was wearing a black sequinned top and embroidered velvet pedal pushes with red heels - an ensemble that matched the designers. Brix rushed up to her and gave her air kisses on her cheeks. Nancy was also carrying Coco her terrier in a red basket. She waved to the fans, public and to the photographers, her two body guards on either side of her. As she approached the entrance to the rescue centre she saw Oscar. She lowered her dark glasses in disbelief. 'What are you doing here? This is just awful. You are awful,' she yelled, slapping Oscar across his cheek.

Oscar, stunned by the slap and shocked to see Nancy, immediately took note of the flashing cameras, a habit from his career, the weight of public scrutiny pushing down on

him again. 'I'm here to support the event,' he replied, his voice steady despite the turmoil.

At that moment, Madeline pushed through the crowd, breaking free of the security and came up to Nancy. 'This is what happens when you entrust your career ... no, your life to an amateur! And what the hell are you doing here Oscar? Aren't you ashamed about what's in the press? Honestly you are a pitiful excuse ...'

Rayner rushed to Madeline in an attempt to defuse the situation. 'This isn't the place, Madeline,' she hissed pulling her aside. But Madeline, fuelled by a sense of betrayal, couldn't hold back. 'You took everything from me,' she spat out, swinging at Rayner, her fist grazing Rayner's shoulder, her second punch making firm contact with her jaw. Rayner stumbled back knocking the basket containing Coco onto the ground.

Josh grabbed a frightened Coco before she could disappear into the crowd, 'Enough! This isn't what today is about!' his authoritative tone raised a cheer from the crowds and lots of claps. People seemed to find the spectacle not only engaging by exhilarating and perhaps also valuable for their social media updates. The photographers and press were

enthused by the variety of images and news they would be able to supply and were already uploading to their feeds.

Nancy, regained her composure once Coco was returned to her, but avoided Oscar. She shook hands with the owners of the charity, made her excuses and was hurriedly whisked into the car by her security detail. Brix and Madeline left with her.

Oscar and Josh stayed behind to visit the shelter animals. The photographers lenses now found a new narrative and the journalists a new angle for their story. Oscar's star quality draw was back on show, there was now the additional element of his charitable work and the unwavering support of his equally striking son, and the two were going to adopt an animal from the shelter. There was added mileage to the sensational images already captured. It now dawned on Oscar that his son was thrust into the limelight because of him. His son who had come to get him away from the ledge and saved him from a descent into the raging sea below - Oscar recalled his dream. He held onto the thought.

Rayner felt guilty at having come up with the plan, launching it and not considering the human cost. At first she told herself she was caught up in it because of the need

to pay her rent, but she recognised that in fact there was an element of competition in her that made her want to deliver something that was better than anything anyone else could have come up with and that included Madeline. Now she realised that the stories, images and drama that fuelled the public-press relationship was not hers to manage because no one could control that. It had a life of its own buffered by endless fascination about the famous which invariably included a mix of envy and need to know about the latest gossip. 'Would any of us live our lives differently if we were celebrities too?' she pondered, her disillusionment now complete.

—

Eric and the PR company were considered a resounding success in brand management and crisis management. The staged event had generated press and media coverage knocking others off entertainment sites and there was talk of nominations for PR industry awards for Eric. There were opinion pieces about the authenticity of the leaked emails concerning Oscar and talk of his possible return to the big screen. Overnight, Nancy Evans was offered numerous endorsement contracts based on what was considered her feisty actions and the grace with which she held herself. She was compared to actors of the golden era and there

were requests for appearances across all media channels. One outlet published a coruscating takedown of Eric and the firm but it didn't stop the supporters. Madeline was given the Nancy Evans contract which thrilled her until she heard that Ben had been promoted to Eric's role and that Eric would be the new chief executive.

'I want to thank you all for your hard work. This singular event has raised our profile and attracted new investors,' said Eric, his voice drowned out by applause and cheers. Eric felt that he had made the right choice to stick at his marriage and his job. He couldn't lose this, he didn't want to. In that moment he believed that this was where he belonged and he let go of a part of himself that still had thoughts of another life. He was also glad that Rayner had handed in her notice as he didn't need a reminder of the past.

As people started to disperse and return to their desks there was a loud cracking sound from above and the ceiling gave way. The building supervisor fell to the ground with a thud, still clutching a screw driver. He had been repairing an element when he got trapped and the heat due to the faulty boiler had sealed his fate. There was debris and dust covering him. The office fell silent. Eric nonchalantly stepped over the body, seemingly untroubled by the loss,

‘Go home, work from there,’ he commanded. ‘We’ll be moving to a new office later this week, HR will contact you’.

—

It had been a long year. Josh stayed on with his father while continuing his studies. They had adopted a dog and a cat from the shelter and Oscar made a documentary about the charity and the artists who helped set it up. Rayner worked on the fund raising and logistics, and had lent a creative hand to the project. The income from the film screenings would go back to the charity. The experience helped Oscar begin to heal and reassess his priorities in a new light. He sat gazing over the still waters of the swimming pool, the early evening light casting a soft glow. Josh and Rayner were playing with the dog and cat at the far end of the garden. They had developed a friendship and were regularly coming up with plans for various creative adventures.

‘I wanted to thank you for sticking your neck out for me,’ Oscar had said earlier, ‘And I want you to know that I won’t let you down.’

Josh had embraced him and said ‘You haven’t let me down. I’m just glad you are happier.’

Happier. The word stuck in Oscar's mind and he considered how he felt about his life now. The dream that once haunted him, with its precipice and the vast, unforgiving sea, seemed a distant memory, its edges softened by the life he was slowly rebuilding.

FAME ATE MY GIRLFRIEND

Kate stumbled out of bed, stretching her limbs languidly. It was already mid-day, the room bathed in a diffused light as a soft, rainy haze clung to the windows. Robyn had just arrived, her arms laden with a steaming carafe of dark roast coffee and a box of flaky, butter-rich pastries, the comforting aromas mingling in the air. Kate had been awake since five in the morning but had gone back to bed after feeding the cats and playing with them. Her plan was to do some reading but recent events played on her mind and she was unable to focus.

‘Not everything is obvious, you know,’ said Kate, reclining on the sofa looking out the window at the overcast sky. Her black and white cat, nestled on a pillow on the sofa, twitched an ear in response.

‘Why are you telling the cat?’ Robyn sank into a bean bag, the old velvet fabric sighing under her. She sipped her coffee and bit down on a cinnamon swirl.

'She looked like she needed to hear it,' Kate replied, her voice tinged with mock solemnity. She leafed through a magazine with palpable disinterest, finally tossing it aside. The cat, startled by the sudden movement, hopped to the floor with an irritable mew and settled by Robyn's feet.

'What happened to your other cat?' Robyn asked, her fingers finding their way through the cat's sleek fur.

'Well, the vet saw her when she was six months and said she wouldn't grow much more because she has a small head.'

'And?'

'She's had a growth spurt. Now she has a small head and a big body. She looks funny-odd but also funny-haha. She may grow some more. She's around, she's outside somewhere. She likes to mooch in other people's gardens. Yesterday the neighbours said she joined them at their table for dinner - just walked in sat on chair and looked at them eating. So, they gave her food.'

'Sounds like you've got a winner there!' smiled Robyn, just as the calico cat jumped in through the window, her short fur slightly damp.

'Give her a rub with this,' said Kate, throwing a small towel at Robyn. The cat sat happily on Robyn's lap.

'What are you up to today?' Robyn scrolled through her phone, selecting a playlist and cranking up the volume.

'Just absorbing earth vibes from this sofa and keeping the cats company,' Kate grinned, stretching her arms. 'Where've you been? Haven't seen you in ages.'

'Working long hours ... and I had a consultation with Jeff about my next tattoo,' Robyn said, a cautious smile playing on her lips.

'He's a fucking racist—bluntly put,' Kate frowned, her voice dropping a notch.

'I know, but for the art style I want, he's the go-to guy,' Robyn shrugged, her indifference clashing with the seriousness of her words.

'Your tats are tiny, though—they'll fade fast. The one on your back looks like ants holding hands,' Kate quipped, her eyebrow raised in playful challenge.

'Not up for discussion ... and fuck you, I like my tats,' laughed Robyn.

'Oh my God you like him, that's what this is about!' laughed Kate.

'Haha, I just wanna slap him, he's got that kind of face,' said Robyn, mimicking a slap in the air. 'I think he would benefit from a good spank too and I'd like to offer.'

'Haha bet he's too vanilla for your taste, you are out of luck,' Kate stuck her tongue out, sinking deeper into the sofa.

'Let's not ruin my fantasies. I've got a new crop and I'm eager to use it,' Robyn countered, her voice laced with mock threat as she swished an imaginary crop through the air. 'Enough about me. How's your love life?'

Kate had been wanting to talk to Robyn about this and launched straight in. 'You know Alicia?'

Robyn nodded, 'You're not still crushing on her?'

'No, wait. Just listen .. Alicia has this big, big thing about this actor right and I told her that he only looks unbelievably gorgeous because of the lighting and make up. Then she flies to New York just to see his play and gets his autograph. She showed me countless pictures of him, and I ended up admitting he looks even better without lighting and make up. She was so thrilled to hear it from someone else that

she kissed me - right on the lips. Of course I kissed her back and that's how we started seeing each other.'

'Hey, you kept that quiet,' said Robyn, 'Where is she now?'

'This actor was in town for his new film's launch. She couldn't miss it; stood at the front row of the barricades, hoping for another autograph,' Kate continued, her tone flat.

'You didn't go with her?'

'Standing outside a cinema for five hours just to see some guy in a suit? Not my scene.'

'He wasn't just some guy though, right?'

'Yeah, whatever, do you want to hear what happened or not?'

'Go on then.'

'So, it starts to rain, but she doesn't move. When he arrives, he waves, starts to head inside but then... he spots her. "Hey, it's you again," he says, remembering her from New York. She literally faints—can you believe it? But he catches

her, lifts her over the barricades, and carries her inside the cinema,' Kate recounted.

'No, fucking way. That's like a movie but in real life.'

'Yeah, seriously. Then he sits with her, makes sure she is alright, before he gets back to his job - you know to entertain the masses or whatever. But he leaves her with his personal email and signs her photos of him. Later, she sends him an email and asks him for a job writing his biography.'

'What!?!'

The rain began to patter against the windows. Kate rose and shut the window, settling back in her spot. 'This guy... this guy... that's all she ever talked about. Anyway, he doesn't reply back straight away, but a few weeks later, she gets an email from his agent asking for samples of her writing. She sends them off and next thing you know, she leaves the country, and me because she lands the job. Now she's his publicist too.'

'Fucking hell! Why didn't you go with her?' Robyn asked, her voice rising slightly in awe at the situation.

'I considered it...' Kate's voice trailed off as she stared out the window, watching the raindrops race each other down the glass. 'She didn't invite me, though. Then she sends me this text, tells me she likes being with me physically and she's really attracted to me, but emotionally, she wants to be with him.'

'Aaaahahaha... are you serious?'

'Yeah, totally. It was crushing to hear because I thought we had something deep, a real connection. And then this happened and I... I don't know, I wanted to have it all with her.' Kate's voice cracked but she remained composed. Kate was someone who preferred to laugh things off rather than delve into uncomfortable matters in any great detail. 'The cats don't miss her - do you?' she asked looking at both of the cats, snug next to Robyn.

'Surely you can compete with the actor—it's not like you have to look like him.' Robyn tried to inject some optimism, but it sounded feeble even to her own ears.

'I don't even know what emotional connection she thinks she has with him. I mean, he's got several people on the go, dates all of them—'

'Well, of course. Look at him. And Alicia, what, just hangs around?' Robyn interjected.

'She's with him most days, but I got the feeling he tells her things about himself that he wouldn't tell anyone else. Maybe she feels special because of that, and maybe that's what draws her to him.' Kate sighed, her gaze still fixed on the window. 'I think I'm over it - well almost. I miss her sometimes, but you know, these things happen.'

'Not often though eh? How many of us can say our partners left us for a movie star?' laughed Robyn.

As the rain outside gathered strength, the living room seemed to close in around them, the cosy warmth contrasting with slight rattle of the windows. Rising from the beanbag, Robyn joined Kate on the sofa, enveloping her in a reassuring hug. Kate responded by sinking into Robyn's embrace, allowing herself a moment of vulnerability.

'What can I do? I want to find a way to win her back. I know it sounds ridiculous but I'm not doing anything else at the moment.'

'Let's just ask ChatGPT for advice,' said Robyn, tapping on her phone.

'What the hell, Robyn. I thought you were going to give me some good suggestions,' Kate mock sulked, Robyn's presence alleviating her upset over Alicia.

'Wait, wait, just listen to this. Give this a chance.' Robyn's tone was earnest as she read out the response from ChatGPT: "Support her career and be patient and understanding. Ultimately, winning her back may require patience, understanding, and a willingness to navigate the complexities of her professional life. However, remember to prioritise your own well-being and happiness throughout this process. If the situation becomes too emotionally taxing or if you feel like your needs aren't being met, it's okay to reassess the relationship and consider your own happiness."

'See, that's solid advice!' Robyn concluded, a note of triumph in her voice.

Kate took the phone from Robyn, her eyes scanning the text as she mulled over the words. A moment later, she looked up, 'I think I need to take more direct action than that. Fancy a trip?'

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'Alicia, this coffee is amazing,' said Guy, easing into a plush chair while a stylist busied herself with his dark hair, twisting strands into a look that seemed effortlessly chic.

'Glad you like it,' Alicia responded, her eyes scanning the garden where photographers, journalists, and various support staff buzzed with activity. Today's agenda was a day-long photoshoot for a high-profile fashion magazine, and Alicia had been orchestrating the chaos since dawn. At dawn, she had been first on the scene, ensuring every detail adhered to her meticulous standards.

The job's demands had come as a surprise to her when she first started; Guy's calendar was full and there were often last-minute changes. Despite having taken on the roles of publicist and personal assistant, she was still operating without any help—Guy had yet to hire an assistant for her. The long hours left her exhausted, her energy sapped by the time she crawled into bed each night. Yet, there was an undeniable thrill in being so integral to his life. She felt a surge of pride knowing she was the one he trusted above all others, the confidante to his most private thoughts and the architect behind his public persona

The photoshoot unfolded in the lush garden of Guy's sprawling Los Angeles home, a haven where manicured

lawns kissed the edges of wild, untamed flower beds. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of towering palm trees, casting playful shadows on the ground that danced with the breeze. It was an idyllic setting, reflective of Guy's current golden era in Hollywood, but today the atmosphere was charged with an undercurrent of tension.

Guy, normally the epitome of calm and charisma, was uncharacteristically fussy. He questioned the photographers about their angles and the lighting crew about the intensity of their spots. Each request he made carried a sharpness that was rare for him, puzzling those accustomed to his usually easygoing nature.

As the crew adjusted their equipment, Guy motioned for Alicia to follow him to a more secluded part of the garden, a small grove encircled by blooming bougainvillea. The vibrant magenta petals contrasted starkly against the serene green, creating a private alcove away from the prying eyes and ears of the bustling set.

'Alicia,' Guy started, his voice low and strained, 'I know I've been a bit difficult today. I'm sorry about that.' He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration and vulnerability. 'It's just... there's someone I've been seeing, and things are getting complicated. It's affecting my focus.'

Alicia listened, her expression composed yet attentive, as she absorbed the weight of his confession.

‘I need you to handle this for me,’ he continued, his gaze searching hers for understanding. ‘I’ll fill you in later, but right now, I just need to know I can count on you.’

‘Of course, Guy,’ Alicia reassured him, her tone firm yet soothing. ‘I’ll take care of it. You just focus on the shoot. We can sort everything else out later.’

Gratitude flickered across Guy’s face, his shoulders relaxing slightly. ‘Thank you, Alicia. I don’t know what I’d do without you.’

As they stepped out of the grove, the chaos of the photoshoot welcomed them back. Guy returned to his marks, his posture now slightly eased, trusting Alicia to manage the storm brewing beyond the garden’s tranquility.

Alicia watched him for a moment, the sunlight catching in her hair, creating a halo effect that mirrored the resolve in her eyes. She then turned away, her mind already racing through her extensive network and resources, planning her next moves with the precision and calm that had made her indispensable.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of flashes and clicks, the earlier tension dissolving under the professionalism that both Guy and Alicia brought to their respective roles. As the sun dipped below the horizon, ribbons of orange and pink across the sky, Alicia knew that the real work was just beginning. But for now, she allowed herself a brief moment of peace, watching the sunset reflect off the cityscape in the distance.

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Robyn adjusted her baseball cap, shielding her eyes from the harsh Los Angeles sun as she and Kate joined the back of the taxi queue. The air was thick with the exhaust of idling engines and the constant murmur of travellers bustling around them. They had just disembarked from their flight, and the fatigue of travel hung on them like a heavy cloak.

‘You didn’t consider where we were going to stay, did you?’ Robyn asked, watching the line of taxis inch forward with excruciating slowness.

‘It’s okay. We can stay with Alicia,’ Kate replied, her voice tinged with optimism.

‘That won’t work. Why would she agree to that?’ Robyn’s skepticism was evident in her furrowed brow.

‘She just has,’ Kate said, a smile breaking across her face as she held up her phone for Robyn to see the text. ‘She needs our help—something to do with Guy.’

‘We are going to be staying in his house!’ Robyn’s tone mixed excitement with disbelief.

‘Yeah, it’s a good place to be, given I want to win her back. If I manage to help her with this problem she’s having, maybe she’ll get back with me.’ Kate’s eyes were full of hope.

Robyn looked at her friend through the side of her eyes, a small smile playing on her lips. Sometimes she didn’t understand how Kate could be so naive. She found it endearing but also worried about ensuring that Kate didn’t get disappointed and hurt on a regular basis—which often happened.

When they arrived at Guy’s house, nestled in a lush, upscale neighbourhood of Los Angeles, the scenery shifted dramatically. The estate was a sprawling, modern masterpiece, with clean lines and expansive glass walls that offered views of manicured gardens.

They were greeted by an almost unrecognisable Alicia. She had slimmed down considerably, losing the beautiful curves that once defined her silhouette. Her long hair was now cut into a short, sharp bob, a stark contrast to her former style. Her face was bare, her usual makeup swapped for a natural look that accentuated her somber eyes. Dressed in trainers, shorts, and a loose t-shirt, she was a far cry from the quirky style she used to have. Despite her changed appearance, her warmth remained the same. She enveloped them both in a tight, double hug, which felt reassuringly familiar.

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Guy rose early, the first light of dawn barely touching the horizon. After a rigorous session with his personal trainer, he wiped the sweat from his brow and checked his messages. Among them was one from Alicia, reassuring him that she was handling his current predicament. A smile of relief spread across his face; having Alicia in his life meant the world ran smoother. She never missed a detail, and her unwavering loyalty was something he deeply trusted. More than just a fan, she was respectful, smart, and kind—qualities he didn't take for granted. Recognising her growing workload, he made a mental note to discuss finding her an assistant during his next meeting with his agent.

With a sense of contentment, he stepped out onto his balcony, the morning air cool and refreshing. He turned on some music, letting the melancholic strains of Tchaikovsky fill the space, setting a thoughtful ambiance. Guy was contemplating auditioning for a role in an upcoming film about a composer and his muse, and he wanted to immerse himself in the right mood before meeting the casting director.

Despite feeling like a minor success, Guy had made significant strides in his acting career since his first role. He hadn't come from a family of thespians; growing up, he thought he would follow in his mother's footsteps and become a music teacher. However, acting had beckoned him—a calling he felt most drawn to. Lighting a cigarette, he leaned against the railing, his eyes drifting towards Kate and Alicia by the pool.

They were deep in conversation, their voices a soft murmur against the gentle splashing of water. Guy watched them, a flicker of concern threading through his otherwise relaxed demeanour. He knew Kate's presence might disrupt the routine he had come to cherish with Alicia. Although he was aware of Alicia's feelings for him, he recognised the impasse between them: he lacked the desire to settle down, and Alicia yearned for commitment. He didn't want to start

anything with her, he had already divulged too much about who he was and therefore there would be no intrigue and mystery which is what he liked about starting something with others. The smoke from his cigarette curled up into the air. How far would he have to go to ensure Alicia stayed, he wondered, and at what cost to everyone involved?

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‘I didn’t expect you to visit, but I am glad to see you,’ said Alicia, her voice carrying a tinge of relief as she sipped her hot peppermint tea. The steam wafted up, mingling with the morning air that carried the scent of blooming jasmine from the nearby gardens.

Kate dangled her legs in the pool, splashing water gently. The sensation was soothing, the warmth of the morning sun comforting. She was glad to be with Alicia but felt a nagging reluctance about leaving anytime soon. ‘What we spoke about earlier? About Guy? I don’t really see how we can help,’ she admitted, her brows knitting in concern.

Alicia set down her tea, her expression serious. ‘I’ll give you the details, and you need to find a way to get the woman to give you the conversation she recorded. It has stuff about an actor that Guy wants to work with, and it won’t look good if what he said gets out. He’s already getting ready to meet

the casting director and really wants the role,' she explained, her worry evident.

'Why doesn't he just pay her off and get the recording back?' Kate suggested, swirling her feet in the water.

'She doesn't want money,' Alicia replied, shaking her head.

'A picture with him then? A walk-on role in a film?'

'He can't give her what she wants. He also does not want to see her again. It was just supposed to be a fling.'

'He needs to be careful about the people he dates I guess. What if the others start to send him threats too?' Kate mused aloud.

At this, Alicia's composure began to fray. Tears welled up in her eyes as she confronted the disheartening reality. She was loath to admit it, but she was deeply disappointed that Guy was not all she had imagined him to be, especially in terms of his personal life. Managing his secret rendezvous, sending impromptu gifts, and finding ways to limit his exposure in the press had become all the more exhausting and emotionally draining because Guy confided everything in her. It made her feel ridiculous for having once considered him to be someone truly special. She had

thought about leaving, but quitting felt like giving up, and she still harboured ambitions to write his biography when she found the time.

Seeing her distress, Kate scooted closer and put her arm around her. 'Don't worry. We'll figure out what to do. It'll be alright, and if it isn't, you can always come home with me. I heard they would be happy to take you back at your old job, and you can always stay at mine for as long as you want while you settle in—no strings.'

Alicia nodded, a weak smile breaking through her tears, grateful for the familiarity and safety she felt with Kate. She had missed Kate, more than she wished to admit and she longed to tell her, but was reluctant too, her pride preventing her from revealing how she really felt.

—

Alicia and Kate had attempted to rouse Robyn from her slumber to join them for errands, but she only rolled over and flipped them the finger in a half-hearted, groggy protest. Laughing at her defiance, they left her to enjoy her sleep and headed out.

Later, Robyn emerged and was immediately struck by the opulence around her. 'Hey, look at you!' she exclaimed,

catching sight of Guy enjoying a late lunch at the garden table, surrounded by lush scenery. The garden was a tapestry of vibrant colours, the air infused with the rich fragrances of flowers—each scent seemed to whisper tales of grandeur and luxury. She sighed contentedly, feeling miles away from the cold, grey skies back home. Here, under the ceaseless blue skies, the sun shone with a zest that matched the bliss of a perfect holiday.

Guy, noticing her approach, lowered his dark sunglasses to get a better look. He appraised Robyn's shoulder-length blonde hair and her freckled nose, noting her relaxed demeanour. 'And you must be Robyn. I spoke to Kate earlier today,' he said, extending a hand in greeting.

'Nice to meet you,' Robyn grinned, shaking his hand firmly. 'Thank you for your hospitality.'

'Of course, the pleasure is all mine. Make yourself at home,' Guy responded warmly, his gaze lingering a moment longer than necessary. 'I hear that you and Kate are here to offer Alicia some much-needed help?'

'Ah, yes. Gonna get started on that later today. Never you worry your pretty head, Guy... and I must say, it is very beautiful,' she smiled playfully, easing into the flirtatious banter.

Guy removed his glasses and set them on the table, intrigued by Robyn's boldness. 'Also, I hear you've been a bad boy, Guy,' she added, a teasing lilt in her voice.

He chuckled, the sound rich and unabashed, as he dabbed his lips with a napkin before discarding it on his now empty plate. 'And how are you around us bad boys?' he asked, his flirtatious nature shining through, an ingrained part of his charm.

'I think there's a thing or two I could teach them,' Robyn retorted, biting into an apple with the confidence of someone who knew how to close a deal.

'Well, then this is going to be a very interesting visit,' Guy said, his smile broadening. He was genuinely pleased for the distraction and the company, looking forward to what the next days might bring with these intriguing visitors.

—

Alicia and Kate found themselves at a luxurious café tucked under awnings that shaded them just enough from the sun's rays. A light breeze whisked through, cooling the air around them as they savoured their coffee and cake. Positioned across the street from the residence of Sadie, the woman they needed to persuade to part with a delicate recording,

the café offered a strategic vantage point. Kate suggested they familiarise themselves with Sadie's movements, hoping to glean insights that might aid their approach. More than that, she relished the opportunity to spend time with Alicia alone, away from the distractions that came with Robyn's presence.

Sitting there, the morning's events replaying in her mind, Kate was forced to confront the depth of her feelings for Alicia. Seeing her again, especially now, under these circumstances, had only deepened her affection. While she was somewhat relieved that Alicia had seen aspects of Guy that she disapproved of, Kate couldn't help but worry whether Alicia would resist Guy if he decided to make a move—something he hadn't done yet, but Kate suspected it was only a matter of time.

'So, what are you going to do when you get home?' Alicia asked, breaking the silence. She felt a rare sense of relaxation, enjoying the simple pleasure of sitting outdoors without the constant need to check her phone and schedule.

'I'm going to focus on the band, look for a new drummer, and Robyn has agreed to play bass,' Kate responded, her voice tinged with resolve. 'I'll keep up the graphic design

gig to pay the bills, but I want to put my music out there and start touring again. I've let it slide since the other members left.' Music had always been her anchor; ever since she was young, all she wanted was to compose and perform. She had some success online with a song, but after her first band dissolved, her momentum had stalled, and it had hit her hard.

Alicia nodded, a smile spreading across her face. 'I'm glad. You've always been happiest surrounded by music, working on your projects.'

'But that doesn't mean I don't have space for you,' Kate added boldly, reaching for Alicia's hand. 'You come first... I want you to know that.'

Alicia's fingers entwined with Kate's, and she leaned forward, pressing her lips to Kate's in a gentle kiss that lingered. The world around them seemed to pause, the sounds of the café and the street fading into a distant murmur. As they pulled away, Alicia felt lightheaded, her smile wide as she gazed into Kate's eyes, their fingers still locked together.

—

'If you move forward one more time, it'll hurt much more,' Robyn threatened with a playful yet menacing glint in her eye.

'I'll use the safe word if you do,' laughed Guy, his voice tinged with excitement.

With the next loud thwack of the crop, Guy collapsed onto the bed, a blissful expression spreading across his face. 'Well, wow,' he murmured, pulling Robyn down to him and kissing her wrist. She responded with another thwack.

Robyn and Guy had spent the day secluded in his bedroom following their flirtation at lunch. They had revelled in each other's company, each moment deepening their escapade into this adventurous exploration. As the afternoon drifted into evening, Guy found himself lost in the exhilaration of the moment, his usual concerns melting away into irrelevance.

They lay in each other's arms, exhausted yet content, gazing into each other's eyes. Their intimate bubble burst when the door flung open with a violent force.

'You jerk!' screamed Sadie, her face contorted with rage.

'Who let you in here?' Guy asked, his voice thick with horror as he scrambled upright.

'Get off him!' Sadie howled, lunging at Robyn, who defensively kicked out, managing to hold Sadie at bay.

The tussle was brief and chaotic, ending abruptly as Sadie collapsed to the floor with a thud.

'You hit her!' Guy exclaimed, his shock palpable.

'Hey, you did too, only with a lamp. At least all I used was the crop,' Robyn retorted with a mixture of defensiveness and guilt.

'Oh God, what are we going to do?' Guy murmured, his hands shaking as he pulled on his trousers.

Robyn thwacked her own hand with the crop, a nervous gesture as she urged herself to think. She was acutely aware of the consequences if Alicia and Kate returned to find this mess. The last thing she wanted was to entangle herself with the law, especially so far from home. As she considered her next moves, she realised that she liked where she was—with Guy—and didn't want anything to change that.

'Okay, just sit for a while and rest,' she instructed Guy, handing him a bottle of vodka. He took a deep swig, then another, his gaze distant, clearly in shock.

Robyn knelt beside Sadie and felt for a pulse—finding none. She swallowed hard, her voice barely a whisper, 'Erm... well, I think there's no need to call anyone just yet.'

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The next morning over breakfast, the tension from the previous day seemed to hover just beneath the surface. Alicia checked Guy's schedule for the day while he, absorbed in his own thoughts, sipped orange juice and scrolled through his messages. 'I'm going to be out for much of the day. I won't need you to come with me, Alicia. Robyn will accompany me,' he said, his tone casual but firm. 'You can take some time—have some rest, perhaps show Kate around town, that kind of thing.'

Alicia sat down slowly, her gaze flickering to Kate, seeking reassurance. 'Thank you, Guy, if you are sure?' she asked, her voice laced with a mix of gratitude and confusion.

He simply nodded, reaching absentmindedly for a slice of toast.

Robyn, seizing the moment, stepped out and sat next to Guy, plucking the toast from his hand and taking a bite. He flashed her a shy smile, surprised by his own bashfulness around her.

‘I have good news, and good news, for both of you,’ Robyn announced, glancing between Alicia and Kate’s stunned faces.

‘First, you won’t need to worry about getting the recording—we’ve locked that down. Second, I took my new crop for a test drive, and it rocks.’

Guy put his hand over his face, hiding his smile and embarrassment.

‘How did you get the recording?’ Kate interjected, her brows knitting together in confusion. ‘Alicia and I followed Sadie and lost her yesterday. We were planning to stake out her place again today and perhaps approach her.’

‘Oh, there’s no need for that,’ Guy chimed in smoothly, eager to steer the conversation away from Sadie. ‘I managed to handle the situation... Let’s just forget about the whole thing.’ Guy had quickly moved past the Sadie event once he realised that dwelling on it might push Robyn away—a prospect he found unexpectedly unbearable. Realising

that he had met someone who matched his needs so perfectly, he had resolved to propose to Robyn sooner rather than later, regardless of any external opinions. He was convinced he couldn't truly be himself with anyone else.

Kate was still trying to digest the news of Robyn and Guy being an item. She chastised herself for feeling a pang of annoyance—her first selfish thought was, 'There goes the bass player.' She knew she should be happy if Robyn was, but she also didn't want to lose her closest friend. And from the looks of it, Robyn wasn't planning on going anywhere soon, especially given how close she sat next to Guy.

'Robyn, may I have a word with you in private?' Kate asked, her voice a mix of resolve and concern.

'Of course.'

Together, they walked towards the pool, leaving Guy and Alicia to sort out the rest of his schedule for the week.

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'Kate, before you say anything ... I love you, and I'll always be there for you,' Robyn started, pulling Kate into a warm, reassuring hug. 'But I think we should launch the new band

here... Let's stay on and see how it goes,' she continued, her eyes alight with excitement. 'I'm sure we can find some contacts and get to work straight away finding other band members.'

'Okay, that I didn't expect...!' Kate replied, her voice tinged with surprise and a hint of concern.

'Look, if it doesn't work out, we can always go home. What's the rush?' Robyn's tone was casual, trying to ease the weight of her proposal.

Kate paused, her gaze drifting over to where Guy and Alicia were deep in discussion. 'Are you in love with him?' she whispered.

'I don't know. What I do know is that for now, I like being with him and living this life,' Robyn admitted. She thought about what she'd be leaving behind—a mundane desk job that, while well-paid, offered little challenge; a shared flat with messy, noisy flatmates; and parents who were often absent, now enjoying their retirement traveling. The only thing she would truly miss was Kate. 'What do you think?' she asked, biting her lip nervously, hoping Kate would see it her way.

Kate nodded slowly, processing everything. Staying would mean she could keep supporting Alicia in her current job. She'd need to bring over her cats and some personal belongings—a big move, but maybe it was worth the leap. She pondered whether acting on impulse was really the right choice, especially considering Alicia's career aspirations with Guy. Would Alicia really want to give up the chance to write his biography if Kate asked her to leave? And if she did, would she regret it later?

'Kate, you wouldn't just be doing this for me, right? This could be a fresh start for both of us, a new adventure. And we don't have to rush anything,' Robyn reassured, sensing Kate's hesitation.

'Yeah,' Kate finally said, a soft sigh escaping her. 'Let's not rush. We'll take it one step at a time and see where it leads. For now, let's just enjoy what we have here.'

The conversation settled into a comfortable silence as they both looked out over the pool, each lost in thoughts of what the future might hold.

Robyn's decision to stay was spurred not just by her attraction to Guy or the allure of a glamorous life away from mundane routines. The sudden shift to Guy's world was like a breath of fresh air, thrilling and intoxicating. More

importantly, it was a blank canvas, offering her the chance to repaint her life with broader strokes filled with vibrant colours of risk and reward. She wanted to take the chance to find out if she could be more than what her previous life had dictated, and she hoped that Kate would join her.

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‘You can’t leave her hand hanging over the sofa like that, it looks weird,’ Robyn remarked, her voice strained from the effort as she adjusted Sadie’s body on the sofa.

‘There’s nothing we can do, her hand and body have stiffened into the pose,’ Guy responded, his tone laced with frustration. He wiped down the table meticulously and rearranged the lamp to make it look as if it had fallen during an accident. They had managed to return Sadie to her apartment, and their plan was to stage the scene to appear as if she had been lifting something heavy that had fatally fallen on her.

‘Well, let me make sure we haven’t forgotten anything. You head for the car and wait for me there,’ Robyn instructed, her voice calm but authoritative.

Guy nodded, his expression grim, and made his way to the door. He paused, his hand on the knob, and then stepped

out into the cool air of the evening, the weight of their actions settling heavily on his shoulders.

Left alone, Robyn took a moment to sit on a chair opposite the sofa, her eyes scanning the lifeless figure of Sadie. It hadn't been their intention for her to die, but panic had escalated, and now there was no turning back. After a brief discussion with Guy, they had decided against involving anyone else. She rose from the chair and began a meticulous search through Sadie's apartment. Robyn sifted through personal items, documents, anything that could inadvertently connect Sadie back to Guy. She checked drawers, looked under cushions, and even scanned through Sadie's digital devices, ensuring that no traces of their communications or any incriminating evidence remained. The next hour was a blur of methodical cleaning and erasing, each minute stretching out before her.

As she finished, Robyn took one last look around the dimly lit room, ensuring everything appeared normal, untouched except for the tragic scene on the sofa. Satisfied that their tracks were covered, she quietly closed the door behind her, her mind racing with the implications of their actions as she made her way to the car where Guy was waiting, enveloped in the silence of their grim resolve.

As Guy sat alone in the car, waiting for Robyn, he was besieged by frantic thoughts. He stared blankly at the dashboard, his mind relentlessly replaying the events that had led them to this precarious juncture. He was acutely aware of his own selfishness, how his actions had spiralled into consequences he hadn't fully anticipated. Yet, despite the chaos, his thoughts kept coming back to Robyn. Her presence had ignited something within him, a spark of exhilaration mixed with a sense of connection he hadn't felt before.

He knew he was standing at a moral crossroads. The gravity of their situation weighed heavily on him, and he recognised the need to confront the emotional fallout of his decisions. It wasn't just about dealing with the immediate repercussions; it was about understanding the deeper changes he needed to make within himself. For too long, he had skirted the edges of his own integrity, dodging consequences with a charming smile or a well-timed distraction. But now, as he waited in the silence of the car, the charm felt hollow.

Determined to look to the future, he realised that his path forward would inevitably be intertwined with Robyn's. She had become his confidante, his co-conspirator, and perhaps, his chance at redemption. This realisation was

both terrifying and invigorating. He was certain now that his future would be with Robyn, and this certainty brought a clarity that was stark against the backdrop of his usual ambivalence. Guy adjusted in his seat, taking a deep breath as he prepared himself for Robyn's return. He resolved that from this moment on, he would strive not just to protect her but also to elevate their relationship above their past actions. He would be better, for her and because of her. As he watched her approaching the car, a sense of resolve solidified within him. No matter the challenges ahead, he was ready to face them, as long as Robyn was by his side.

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Alicia kissed Kate and wrapped her in a long, heartfelt hug. 'You'll be amazing,' she said, her smile radiating pride and affection. It had been a year since Kate and Robyn had first arrived, and the air buzzed with excitement over what they had achieved together.

Kate nodded, her stomach fluttering with nerves. She felt lightheaded but determined as she made her way to the stage, where the sound of loud, encouraging cheers and delighted whoops greeted her. She joined Robyn and the rest of the band on the small stage set up in the corner of the bustling bar.

Guy and Alicia remained on the sidelines, their presence a solid pillar of support. They watched with beaming faces as the crowd gathered closer. The publicity for the event had been masterfully handled by Alicia, and Guy had pulled in some favours to help fund their debut show. The small bar in the city was now packed with an eager audience, their anticipation palpable in the charged atmosphere.

‘All right, everybody!’ Kate shouted into the microphone, her voice cutting through the chatter and ramping up the adrenaline in the room. She strummed her guitar with a confident twang that resonated over the murmurs of the crowd. ‘Let’s go, here is our first song, available everywhere, ‘Fame Ate My Girlfriend!’

The band launched into their first number, the music a powerful blend of raw energy and polished skill. As the first chords struck, the crowd erupted into a frenzy of cheers, the excitement of the moment washing over everyone present. Robyn felt a surge of exhilaration as she lost herself in the music, the worries of the past melting away with each note they played. Guy and Alicia exchanged a look, a silent acknowledgment of the events that had brought them all here. As the music soared, they couldn’t help but feel a sense of wonder at the unpredictable twists of fate. As the final notes of the set echoed through the bar, the applause

was thunderous, a resounding affirmation that no matter the trials they had faced, they had emerged more connected than ever.

DISINTEGRATION GAME

Marlow is trying to remake himself, with his distended belly, chicken-thin legs and receding hairline, and his personal trainer thinks he's expecting a lot, but of course he doesn't voice this out loud, he gives Marlow congratulatory platitudes and encouragement and showers him with positivity. At first Marlow doesn't really believe any of it of course, but then there's also a side of him that thinks, who's to say he won't emerge as a new man by the end of the year. It could happen. Others have achieved it.

The gym Marlow goes to stands as an edifice of physical transformation, with its sumptuous surroundings set in a golf park at the fringe of a bustling city, its interior designed to look less mechanical and more earthy and natural. The weights, machines and workout paraphernalia are housed in a building with oak and teak furnishings, splashes of greenery, a large spa, therapy area and moderate-sized swimming pool. There is a cafe and seating in a private garden. Membership is strictly vetted and there is a lengthy

waiting list according to the administration of the gym and golf club.

Marlow waited a month for his membership to be approved. In that time his divorce came through, his secret lover left him for a woman half his age and his crush told him in no uncertain words that he didn't stand a chance with her in this life or the next. Marlow determined that the rejections of late were more to do with his form than substance, he considered himself well-read, easy going and well-travelled. That was what he said on his profile for an exclusive dating agency that only took on clients willing to pay over ten thousand a month for the privilege of being on their books and meeting a minimum of two suitable people a month. Marlow wasn't sure whether he had signed up more out of social pressures to find someone and become the other half, or whether he genuinely wanted to start again and share his life and all it entailed with someone new.

His personal trainer, Baptiste, worked at the gym full time and had a waiting list of people wanting individual sessions with him. Marlow liked the look of Baptiste, the way he spoke with his deep precise voice, and how he held himself, head lifted, shoulders back showcasing his broad chest and solid abs. Marlow hoped to strike up a good relationship with him that made the personal trainer invest in Marlow's

dream of becoming transformed, emerging from his rotund, pudgy cocoon into a solid mass of muscle. Baptiste, a veteran of countless personal battles and triumphs within the gym confines and further, had casually remarked that the gym was a factory of the self, where people through sweat and toil, sought to and managed to manufacture better versions of themselves. He firmly believed it was possible for anyone to achieve their ideal body, revealing who they truly were to the world, shaking off the uncomfortable, tired suit that no one found appealing least of all the person themselves. He suggested that Marlow look into services that could help him get a more pronounced chin through surgery and recommended options for his hair loss. Marlow took down the details, grateful for the all round, confidential service the gym offered and excited about his journey to becoming his true self.

‘One thing we don’t do around here is take short cuts,’ said Baptiste, making notes on his handheld computer. ‘I will make sure you have the necessary nutritional guidance and weekly training programme that you need to stick to. This will complement our one to one sessions,’ Baptiste flashed a smile in Marlow’s direction before returning to his notes. Marlow was a client he wanted to keep, he needed the wealthiest people on his roster to fill up his diary for one to

ones. A full diary with dedicated clients made him more attractive to management and put him in the running for a promotion, something he desperately wanted not just for the additional pay but for the prestige. 'You need to dedicate yourself to a minimum of five days a week in the gym to meet the target you have set yourself, and let me know if you have concerns about anything or problems with the routine. You have my personal number and I am available to you 24/7,' said Baptiste, placing a reassuring hand on Marlow's thick shoulder.

Marlow nodded, chubby large hands clasped together. He needed to get a manicure he thought. He had been on leave from work for three months, seeing to his post-divorce wounds, and wanted to look as presentable as possible on his return. He worked as an advertising director for a large firm with a portfolio of luxury brands, and there was always someone waiting in the wings to replace him. When he joined the company he couldn't have foreseen his rapid ascent. It was due to a mix of being in the right place at the right time and his marriage to the daughter of a well-known financier, that made him set for rapid promotion. Thankfully he still had the support of the financier even with the divorce. The financier seemed to think more of Marlow than his own daughter, Charlotte, who was a successful business coach and consultant, and pushed Marlow to do more, be

more and rise higher on his own merit. Marlow didn't think it was important because he had the ability to get people on his side almost immediately. This was mainly when it came to men in the workplace which extended across social activities since that was still the traditional additional networking ground for men in his workplace. He was less successful when it came to women. He felt that his marriage to Charlotte was a result of her father's preference for him rather than anything special that Charlotte saw in him.

Now, he wanted to be equally successful in his personal life as his professional one, and he felt that the only thing holding him back was his looks, his form, his body, his presentation. He felt the deficit deeply since his team was populated by men who looked like they had walked straight off the fashion circuit in major cities - it helped them reel in clients, that much was clear from the hiring choices made by the executives. As one of his charge said 'No one wants to buy pizza from someone with spots all over their face and really bad skin.' Marlow considered that briefly before reminding his team about diversity and inclusion in the workplace regardless of how a person looked. It didn't matter whether he believed it and his team holding to it would be a rarity, but he knew they needed to be careful about what they said especially since their clients were

seeking to elevate their merchandise in new markets. There were no women in Marlow's team, although he made sure to sign up to high profile diversity programmes to signal that it was a work in progress, and that there was commitment even without the actual presence of women in senior roles in the firm. Some of hard hitters in the industry at his level were women, but that didn't stop major accounts from sticking with Marlow, there was still something remaining of bias in the sector, albeit hidden behind a veil of progressive rhetoric, backroom deals and awards.

Marlow eyed Baptiste - there was potential for him to be in an upcoming ad campaign. He made a mental note to consider it further. Perhaps that would make him work harder on behalf of Marlow. It was a relationship style that Marlow used often and to good effect. It also meant that most of his deals happened without transparency and made people wonder how he garnered loyalty from some of the most prestigious clients.

'Today, take your time with the exercises on the list. Don't push yourself all at once. Make sure to give yourself time to unwind,' said Baptiste rising. 'I'll see you tomorrow for our first one to one, alright Marlow?' Baptiste could barely conceal his delight that Marlow had signed off on the full suite of personal training options. This was a substantial win

for Baptiste who hadn't been working in the gym as long as the others and wanted to make an impression fast.

'Yes, thank you. I am looking forward to it,' said Marlow rising and stretching, his t-shirt riding up revealing his flabby belly covered in dark hair.

Marlow decided to work out on the second floor of the gym where it was usually less busy. He stood at a treadmill selecting the workout programme, while glancing discretely at the people around him, each engaged in their own solitary struggle. The rhythmic cadence of footsteps on treadmills, the soft thud of dumbbells being returned to their racks, the gentle hum of cycling machines—it all merged into a symphony of endeavour, barely audible over the piped in music.

Marlow felt a deep sense of isolation as he stepped on the treadmill and walked at a slow pace. He saw himself reflected in the mirror ahead of him and wished there were fewer mirrors reminding him of what he actually looked like. He tried to imagine what he would look like after twelve months but it was difficult when what was staring back at him was a middle aged man who had let himself go. It made him feel deeply unhappy which led to thoughts of what he would be having for dinner. He pushed back

against those thoughts as best he could but wondered when he had forgotten that it was important to be both good looking and successful. Was there a time when his success would have been enough to attract a partner and keep them? His ex-wife, Charlotte, had been less than generous about his body and performance when she moved into a separate room in their house and started seeing other people. He left her to it, too embarrassed to argue and preferring not to know the details of the company she now preferred to keep.

It was then that he had taken a lover himself, meeting her through his social media profile. She had reached out to him for job advice, ostensibly seeking a mentor in the industry. When they met it was clear she wanted the opportunity very much and would extend herself to impress Marlow, who was content to oblige at the time. He never secured her a role or even a mentorship. Their dalliance was easy at first, but then she became more demanding and less inclined to fulfil his physical needs. He thought back to their time together realising that he saw it more as a chore, and really his motivation was to show Charlotte that he too could find someone else just like she had. Marlow sighed, wondering if he really wanted to become attractive to women, perhaps that wasn't his main motivation for

improving his looks, maybe he wanted to look better for himself. If that was the case he never recognised it before.

As Marlow moved from machine to machine, he realised how conducive to introspection the environment was. He had hoped that being in the gym would help him forget his concerns but instead they had amplified them. He knew what he was striving for, he realised what he wanted but he wasn't sure he would make it. Physical aesthetics were paramount in his industry, he knew what sold and what didn't, yet it had taken him over a year to realise that it applied to him too, even now when he had scaled the ladder he became acutely aware of those below him who were ready to upend his achievements and scramble over him. He decided he would need a personal assistant to overhaul his wardrobe and help him with a make over. He couldn't just expect to hold everything off until the work he put in at the gym paid off.

The mirrored walls, seemingly not offering any answers when he first entered the gym, had forced him to reflect on every single one of his visible flaws, multiplying and distorting them until they were all he could see causing him deep pain and unhappiness. With each pull and release on the weights machine, Marlow felt the immensity of his task, would he be satisfied with what he achieved in a month, or

the next? He released the weights with a loud clang and headed for the sauna.

Baptiste was given a sizeable bonus for signing up Marlow for private sessions. He was overjoyed but knew that he needed to get results fast otherwise Marlow would move on, perhaps spend everything on cosmetic surgery rather than put in the work. He had clients who had done just that, it took a while for them to realise that even with surgery, they still needed to do the basics to maintain their form and more importantly their health. But Baptiste was used to the battles with clients to get them to understand the importance of keeping fit. These days he spoke to them on their level, keeping them happy was his only goal since that propelled demand for his services. He didn't want to work for a company for longer than he had to, he had big plans, he wanted more for himself beyond a job that paid the bills. He didn't want to be working in a gym by the time he hit thirty.

Charlotte was stunned when she saw Marlow four months later. He was wearing a sharply cut suit, had lost weight and had a healthy glow. He was attending a classical recital with a workplace colleague when she ran into him.

'Marlow, darling! Look at you, what a transformation,' she smiled, giving him air kisses.

Marlow held her gaze, before returning the compliment, although Charlotte didn't look especially well and he felt her dress was far too revealing for someone her age. 'I'm glad you are doing well. I hope you enjoy the recital,' he said, anxious to move on.

Charlotte held on to his arm and gave it a squeeze until he introduced her to his companion. 'See you soon Marlow,' she smiled broadly, her teeth showing.

Marlow remembered that smile, she had used it when they first met at university. They got together in their first year and had dated until they graduated. Marlow often wondered what it would have been like to be like the others he shared halls of residence with, who experimented with different partners, drugs and alcohol - none of which Marlow did. He spent his time studying, making contact with industry experts and visiting Charlotte's parents at their various homes in the country and abroad. He was overwhelmed by their wealth but didn't let it show although he wanted to make a firm impression that lasted so there was always a chance they would help him when he needed to enter the job market. Marlow was raised by parents who

had very set views on how a person progressed through life. It was important to them that he gave himself to his studies and land a good job, because life had not been kind to Marlow's parents, both of whom had lost substantial inheritances and family wealth through unlucky investments and lack of foresight. When Marlow announced his marriage to Charlotte they congratulated themselves on raising him right. Following his divorce both parents distanced themselves from him although Marlow continued to pay their expenses and ensured they had everything they needed. However, he seldom visited or spoke to them, and he rarely missed them because when he was around them he felt shame for having let them down, he knew they deeply resented having to tell people about his divorce and had tried to keep it a secret for as long as they could.

The recital evening was uneventful after the brief exchange with Charlotte. Marlow wasn't particular impressed by the performance and even less taken by the company he had that evening, but he had promised to show the new recruit around town as a favour to a board member who knew a friend of the new hires mother. The young man, Denton, couldn't have been more than 30 but was already pulling in an eye watering salary by landing the job. He had a healthy network of connections through his mother, which most people would be envious of, but Denton seemed more

interested in hearing about Marlow's networks and learning from him.

'I hope you will consider being my mentor Marlow. I really want to learn from you and be guided by your wisdom. I've heard a lot about your work and I am willing to learn,' said Denton, offering Marlow a cigarette.

'No, thank you. Those things will kill you' said Marlow, waiting on the kerb for his ride. It was a busy evening with new theatrical releases for the summer and the usual influx of tourists this time of year. 'Contact my PA and get some time in the diary, we can talk about it then,' said Marlow, giving Denton a wave goodbye as he entered the car.

Denton watched the car pull off, a wry smile forming on his lips. He had been angling for an opportunity to work in this particular company because he had heard that there were opportunities to rise swiftly up the ranks. He had badgered his mother to do everything she could to get him the job. It was hard going as she was someone who didn't like calling in favours for her son, who she felt was work shy and opportunistic, and the fewer people who knew about who he was the better as she didn't want him to damage her reputation. True she was a reluctant parent, but she felt she had done her best to give him what he needed for his

development and she was disappointed with the outcome given the time she had invested in him, not to mention the resources. In his second year at university she had paid for him to see a therapist, fearful that she had raised a narcissist for a son after hearing from friends about his extra-curricular activities which included selling answers to exam questions, developing a drug habit which included setting up a drug route for the university campus and getting two women pregnant with little care and no concern for their wellbeing. But on this occasion Denton's mother had given in, mainly to get him out of her house and he had promised her it would be the last time he would ask her for anything. She gave him a pat on the shoulder when he left, securing an apartment of his own after landing the job. After his first two days in his new role Denton realised it was Marlow's job that he wanted and that he would do anything to get it.

Marlow looked at himself in the mirror, removing his robe and scrutinising his profile. He had hoped for faster results. He made a decision to make arrangements for surgery and a hair transplant. He knew he would need to be away from work for a long while, but decided he would ask to work abroad during that time rather than taking the time off. That would mean he could keep an eye on everything, especially Denton, who had become a permanent fixture every time

he turned around. It was clear the young gun was angling for his job although when Marlow confided in a colleague about it, they had disagreed, seeing Denton as eager rather than manipulative. Denton was very good at getting people on his side, much like Marlow, but Marlow was convinced there was a more insidious side to Denton which he could see but perhaps others were less inclined to attribute to Denton given his striking good looks, winning smile and easy manner. It wasn't until Denton joined the same gym as Marlow and hired Baptiste as his personal trainer too that Marlow trusted his instincts fully - Denton was definitely after his job.

Baptiste was promoted again after signing two more clients from Marlow's firm, both of whom had joined the gym saying they were amazed with Marlow's transformation. Baptiste didn't feel he could take much credit for that because it was Marlow who pushed himself relentlessly, but he let that slide and decided to agree with those who credited Marlow's transformation to his work alone. Denton was one of Baptiste's new clients. He was in very good shape and seemed to want ongoing support with his training regime. Baptiste was immediately attracted to Denton, he had a way about him that was both confident and vulnerable, he was well-spoken and had striking looks in the traditional male model wearing aviator glasses way.

Baptiste knew that there was nothing he could do about his crush because it would put his job at risk, but that didn't stop him imagining what it would be like to be with Denton and learn more about him. Denton chose Baptiste because he wanted information about Marlow, especially his weaknesses, but he knew that Baptiste was cautious about discussing clients so Denton knew he would need to invest time to get what he wanted. After their first session in the gym, Denton felt more confident, it was clear that Baptiste was attracted to him, so he felt that he could get what he wanted sooner than he thought.

'You've taken Denton on?' Marlow asked putting down a weight. Baptiste nodded distractedly. Marlow came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder, letting it rest there. Baptiste turned 'Are you okay?'

'Our conversations are private Baptiste. Denton might be a colleague but I consider my gym time private along with what we discuss. Clear?'

'Of course! There's no question about that Marlow,' said Baptiste feeling flushed remembering the coffee he had with Denton. He was in town doing his weekend shopping when he had run into Denton. They had planned to see a film later in the week. 'Everything is confidential with my

clients,' Baptiste said, to reassure Marlow and remind himself to tread carefully with Denton, who had already asked him for all the gossip. He said he was just joking around and laughed it off when Baptiste told him about the gym policy on client confidentiality.

'Ha! I read that policy document, all 120 pages of it before I signed on the dotted line,' said Denton at the time. 'Let's meet again, I've enjoyed our time together this afternoon.' Baptiste wanted to turn him down, but was unable to, he felt a lift when Denton's eyes were on him and the attention that Denton lavished on him was like an elixir for his loneliness outside of the gym.

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Marlow sat by the pool and pondered his next steps. He was not losing his position to Denton. He had a couple of choices. He could give Baptiste an opportunity to do some work on commercials, making him more aware of where his loyalties should lie or he could get himself promoted. It was time he moved on and perhaps that would be the best thing to do. But he realised that even if he did that, he would still need to get rid of Denton who he believed was a toxic presence in the company and he didn't like the fact that Denton had wormed his way into senior meetings without

having the requisite job title or experience. It was causing other people to become jealous and unhappy. Marlow decided to pay Charlotte's father a visit and lay everything out for him. It was possibly the only thing he could do without bringing everything out in the workplace, which could land up in a messy battle through HR, which he really didn't need especially given that two senior executives were off on permanent leave because of sex discrimination cases filed against them. Both of the cases had been leaked to the media and had put pressure on hiring decisions made by the board given that the top tier was still all male. This had landed on Marlow's desk with a loud, resounding thud, because he had been given the diversity portfolio and for three years had not made a dent in the profile of senior roles.

Marlow sighed audibly watching a woman jump with a splash into the pool disturbing the peace and tranquility of the spa area. He noticed two people who had been swimming peacefully in the pool get annoyed by the disruptive swimmer who was now doing laps in a pool ill suited for it. She continued to do her laps splashing water and making loud huffing sounds as she dipped and then emerged out of the water. He wondered why people were so reluctant to stick to what was required of the different environments they were in. Surely if she wanted to do laps

she could have gone to a pool which was large enough where that was the main function. In the spa, the pool was small and used for people to do some relaxing and have a dip after being in the sauna. Marlow moved to the side of the pool watching as the woman paused before her next lap. 'This pool isn't for doing laps,' he said loudly.

'Mind your own business,' she screamed at him her face red and blotchy.

Marlow flipped her the finger and walked off, surprised at his behaviour, and then realising that he must be very stressed by the situation with Denton to have acted out that way in public.

—

Charlotte's father, Gerald, was glad to see Marlow. They spent the day in an exclusive off radar drinking club that only admitted men, and then only men who had the requisite connections - it wasn't just about old money any longer. Marlow was uncomfortable with the setting worried that his presence might be picked up by the press and used to show he wasn't a supporter of equality which would explain his all male team. When Marlow told him about the problems he was having, Gerald decided to put his foot down. 'Enough is enough Marlow. You need to diversify

your team and fast. I can't cover you with that,' he said, puffing on a cigar.

'Gerald, *your* team is all male,' said Marlow.

'I work in finance, no one bats an eye,' Gerald said matter of factly. 'An easy solution would be to hire Charlotte and her friend ... what's her name again? Alice? Or is it ...'

'What!?' said Marlow, much louder than he expected.

Gerald raised both his hands admonishing Marlow to quieten down. 'It's a good idea Marlow, she's more than qualified to knock your HR team into shape and get things done. And she can bring a couple of her female friends along and there you have it, you get to tick some boxes fast. Who knows you may even win an award for it,' Gerald was pleased with his quick thinking and how the solution presented itself with ease, so he decided to make the call right away. Marlow wasn't so sure about the course of action and chastised himself for approaching Gerald rather than handling it himself. Then he thought that it would be a good time for him to go away and work abroad until he healed from his surgery. He proposed this to Gerald and asked him if he could clear it with his friends on the board. Gerald was reticent about it until he heard the reason.

'I like a man who takes charge of his looks. It matters Marlow, and the higher you go it becomes even more so,' he said, squeezing Marlow's thigh. 'I'll sort this out for you, it's not a problem. Now that our business is concluded, let's go play a round of snooker shall we?'

Baptiste woke with a headache. He groaned when he realised what he had done the night before. He had gone clubbing late into the night and had broken his personal rule, he had alcohol, and lots of it. He turned to his side and saw Denton sleeping on the sofa, a throw over him. He couldn't remember how Denton had come home with him. He wasn't sure where he stood with Denton and neither was he comfortable with letting this remain unspoken. He watched Denton breathing and soaked in every aspect of him, trying to capture the moment and remember it for all time. He knew he was lost when it came to Denton.

Charlotte rolled her eyes when she heard her father's plan but she didn't want to go against his wishes because the last time she did he cut off her monthly allowance and asked her to leave her apartment which he owned. Growing up, raised by him, she knew she needed to obey him. She

had tried to strike out on her own, but her father had torpedoed her client list and threatened to make her known as the worst business coach in the city. She often wondered what life would be like without him. When she was a teenager she had spent her holidays reading murder mysteries and researching poisons, convinced that that was the only way to get away from him. As it transpired she never came close to eliminating her father, instead she became more drawn into his circle as she aged, becoming used to the trappings his wealth offered and becoming complacent about making her way in the world on her own.

Everything was set in motion quickly. Marlow would go abroad, Charlotte would join the company and bring two of her friends with her and she would support Marlow's bid to become the chief executive of the company on his return.

'I'm sorry Marlow, I just thought you should know,' said Baptiste, hunched over a mug of tea. He looked sad and tired, very unlike the person Marlow was used to seeing.

'If it is money you need Baptiste, I can introduce you to some agents who would put you on their books for commercials and modelling assignments. But I really want to continue working with you as my personal trainer,' said

Marlow, aghast to hear that Baptiste was handing in his notice at the gym and was planning to leave the city. It was sudden and unexpected and Marlow wasn't sure what had brought it on, although in the back of his mind he did wonder if it had something to do with Denton.

Baptiste put his hand on top of Marlow's. 'You are a good man. I think I just need a break and to rethink my career. City life is hard, it's difficult to tell who is on your side and who is not, and it can get confusing, and I really don't want to loose myself to it. You know? I want to retain something of myself, I want to be proud of what I do and I can feel myself drifting.'

Marlow knew that this would not be the best time to confront Baptiste about Denton. He decided to help him out instead, perhaps he could find a way for Baptiste to be happier doing something else. Baptiste had been there for him and he knew that he had done his best.

Marlow left for his surgery feeling secure. He imagined himself returning a new man, a head full of hair, a waistline to be proud off and a jaw line that would look good at any business meeting. Marlow spent his flight thinking about what it would feel like to look in a mirror and love what he

saw. He perused the inflight magazines taking in the images of men posing for different advertisements. Perhaps he would finally feel that he too was attractive. He took a few calls and sent some messages to Charlotte to check she was settling in. Her responses were noncommittal which was unusual although she did mention speaking with Denton and her voice had a lilt to it that he hadn't heard in a long time. He dismissed the thought of Denton and Charlotte getting together, putting it down to Charlotte's own issues about her age and attractiveness. Marlow wondered if she would consider reigniting their relationship when she saw the new him. He still felt that they were suited for each other. It made sense and could fulfil both their ambitions. Not everyone could find someone to fall in love with. Some people needed to be practical about the unions they went into. Falling in love was manufactured in so many ways and being in advertising Marlow felt this more than most. His relationship with Charlotte was practical and functional and they had achieved a lot as a couple including increasing their combined capital.

Denton sent Baptiste several messages but didn't get a response. He was worried, things had taken a turn for the unexpected. He found Baptiste's outlook beautifully naive

and genuine, and had expected Baptiste to give in to him quickly. When he heard about Baptiste's dreams of developing his own brand and his ambitions to open a gym, he had laughed it off as commonplace, not to Baptiste's face, but in private. Then when they went out for the evening, had an intimate dinner and danced, laughed and talked, Denton found himself less able to extract the information he wanted from Baptiste. He went home with Baptiste because he wanted to get hold of information about Marlow and others in the company. But Baptiste still refused to give way even though he was drunk.

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'Well done Denton. A promotion that is well deserved,' said a senior executive without meaning it. Denton sat behind the new desk in his new office. He was the youngest director in the company and the third youngest in the industry. His mother had sent him a card congratulating him. He threw it in the bin. He hadn't managed to find out about Marlow and whether he had been told about his new job. Denton had used information about Marlow's insecurities to start rumours in the company about his state of mind. He had also found out that Marlow had confessed about the way he had made some of his more difficult decisions, not all of them was to be applauded. It hadn't

taken long for Denton to be offered Marlow's job especially after he pitched two of Marlow's campaign ideas to the board and passed them off as his own. Truth be told Denton never expected to find all the information he needed. He justified his actions to himself by saying that Marlow would have done the same in his position. In private Denton had been amused by Marlow's fears about his looks and his deep seated need to improve on them. He realised that Marlow working abroad could only mean that he was getting work done on himself. He wondered how he could use that to his advantage. Denton was not the kind to do any actual work, so he needed to find ways to secure his future. The whole experience of landing Marlow's job had made him feel he had been selling himself short. He could do more, much more, he needed to aim higher.

Baptiste had signed up to do the commercials and modelling. He had also set up as a personal trainer and was working with clients in the city in his spare time. He had cut Denton out of his life, although he missed him. You can't do anything about the person you are attracted to he told himself, he just wished it wasn't someone as manipulative and uncaring as Denton. Some days the thought of what had happened would send him into a rage and he would lift

weights and jog until he collapsed. It was the only way to empty his mind and stop thinking about Denton, his smile, his laugh and the way it felt to have him dance next to him. Other times he would write about what he had with Denton and then shut his journal embarrassed, realising nothing had happened between them and that he had only known Denton for a month. It upset him that his life had been up ended in such a short period of time by someone who clearly did not care for him and only wanted to get information about his clients. On lucid days Baptiste admitted to himself that he always suspected Denton's motivations but was enamoured by the attention and the fact someone like Denton wanted to spend time with him. It was in Baptiste's mind to let it all go and focus on his new life, but then he received a call from Marlow and his life took a sharp turn.

It was dark when Baptiste arrived. The golf course was accessible from the staff entrance and that was the one that Baptiste used. He wasn't sure whether he was headed in the right direction, and continued sending text messages for confirmation. He found his way to the mid-point of the course and in the distance he saw someone lying on the ground. As he ventured closer he made out the man, dressed in a white polo shirt with black trousers. His feet were bare, his shoes lay at the side. Next to him was a golf

club. Baptiste knelt next to the body and felt for a pulse. There was none. He heard a golf cart approach.

'Let's get him out of here,' said Marlow.

Baptiste took a while to respond. He was surprised at how Marlow looked. It had been months since he last saw him but Marlow looked very different. His profile, his hair, his body - everything had changed. His voice and eyes were familiar, but every single other thing was different.

'Hurry up,' commanded Marlow.

They lifted the body into the cart and drove in silence.

As Marlow was leaving he turned to Baptiste and growled 'Maybe next time you'll think better of betraying me.'

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Marlow sat at the head of the long, polished teak table looking through the documents. The board members were seated waiting for his response. He signalled for a pen and signed the documents with a flourish. The board members clapped a couple thumping Marlow on his back. He stood and congratulated everyone. Under Marlow's leadership they had acquired their competitor and were poised to

become an even bigger force in the industry. Charlotte stood by Marlow's side, but he didn't acknowledge her presence.

Marlow held the weights firmly and looked in the mirror. He liked what he saw. It had been over a year and his transformation made him feel fulfilled and desirable. He knew it would always be a work in progress but he wanted to continue. He hadn't realised how much he needed to like his own image. Before he liked what he was on the inside, but it was now different. He spent hours on most days coming to terms with having killed a person using a golf club. He didn't know he had such rage in him. He had lifted the club and struck out at the person over and over again.

When Marlow returned to work after his time abroad, it was announced that he was the new chief executive of the company. He saw Denton's face fall when the announcement was made. Denton hadn't expected Marlow to return. Marlow ignored Denton for the rest of day. Marlow noticed that his fists were balled up when Charlotte entered the office.

'I'm not needed here any longer. Father thinks everything has worked out fine,' she said, unable to look away from Marlow. She was struck at how little he resembled the person she knew. She caught sight of herself in the reflection in the window and realised she was losing more of herself, the person she once knew was fading away.

'Why is Denton still here?' asked Marlow.

Charlotte shrugged and then gulped. She didn't want Marlow to see her cry.

'You've heard the things he's been saying about me? It's all over the office, and who knows where else!'

'No one cares Marlow. You have your senior position now.'

'Yes, but with no credibility! Everyone knows intimate details about me.'

Charlotte shrugged. 'They'll forget in time.'

'Hardly.'

When Marlow got home that evening he couldn't quell the shame, grief and rage in him. The embarrassment and humiliation did not suit the person he saw in the mirror. He

was everything he wanted to be but he knew he would walk down the corridors at work and hear the laughter behind his back. It was in that moment that he had decided to call Denton and arrange a meeting at the golf club. Denton was happy to oblige and it was easy to get him to go along with him for a game and bring down the club on his skull repeatedly.

Marlow knew he could have handled the disposal of Denton's body himself; his new physical prowess and hardened resolve made him capable of much. Yet, he chose not to shoulder this task alone. He involved Baptiste, a move that marked a definitive end to Marlow's era of compliance and forgiveness. This new Marlow looked upon his past self with disdain—no longer the man who bent to accommodate others' needs, but one who shaped reality to his will. How could he reconcile this iron-willed titan with the yielding man of before? It was clear—he couldn't.

When Denton's body was eventually found in the garbage chute of his high-rise apartment, it stirred little more than murmured speculations among those who knew him. Denton had not been a beloved figure; his past was checkered with manipulations and enemies. The news of his demise seemed almost a foregone conclusion to his contentious narrative. At his funeral, the cold formalities

were observed—a few perfunctory words from his estranged mother, her voice devoid of warmth, before she retreated to the sanctity of her corporate life. Marlow lingered afterward, offering hollow thanks to the attendees, a pantomime of grief.

Gerald's gaze upon him was piercing, knowing. When the older man approached, his words were laced with relief. 'Whoever got rid of Denton did all of us a favour,' Gerald declared, his voice a low rumble of vindication.

Marlow, momentarily taken aback, struggled to mask his reaction. 'I don't follow, Gerald,' he replied, feigning ignorance.

Gerald scoffed, clapping a heavy hand on Marlow's shoulder. 'Charlotte and Denton? Didn't you know? God, the thought of him in the family... I'd have done the job myself if it came to it.'

Marlow looked off into the distance, taking time to process Gerald's words.

'It's good to have you back, Marlow—though, I must say, I barely recognised you!'

In that moment, clarity dawned on Marlow. It wasn't Baptiste who had betrayed him; it had been Charlotte. She was the conduit through which Denton had siphoned his secrets, weaponising his vulnerabilities against him. A bitter taste of betrayal lingered, but it was swiftly replaced by a calculating coldness.

'Shall we go for a round of golf?' smiled Gerald, patting Marlow on the shoulder.

Gerald's suggestion of a golf round didn't just signify a return to leisure; it was a tacit endorsement of Marlow's actions, a sealing of complicit understanding between the powerful. As they walked towards their cars, the low murmur of the city in the background, Marlow felt the final remnants of his old self slough off like dead skin. He was reborn, armoured against the world's judgment.

CHASING GHOSTS

Dearest,

It has been several months since I last heard your voice and I wonder when I will hear from you again. I miss you. I want more, much more - I have loved you for so long. It must make sense to you too, surely you can understand. Don't you want it too? We have known each other for long enough for you to step out of the mirage of your existence and choose to live a real life and finally be free.

Yours in hope.

—

It was a sunny day and early risers were already making full use of it, walking their dogs, watering their lawns and going for jogs. The weekends were a pleasure in the neighbourhood and while it should have encouraged Beth to do something fun, she was sitting on her sofa having a disagreement with her sister over the phone about their father, Stanley.

She put the phone on speaker, placing it on a pile of magazines on her low coffee table. Jamie, her older sister was shouting, 'I told you, Dad doesn't care. Just walk away! How many times do we have to have this conversation? You woke me for this? I work late nights Beth!'

'I want to try. It's important to me,' Beth said. In her mind she considered that she was being calm and poised unlike her older sister, and although she recognised that she had bothered her sister early in the morning - too early for conversations about difficult parents - she still felt better than her sister for her ability to stay level-headed. She wondered why she always felt the need to compete with Jamie given they often were more successful when they just worked together. Like the time they managed to convince their grandparents to move closer to the neighbourhood so the family could check in on them - it wasn't working when Beth broached the subject as it made them feel much older than they felt, but when Jamie supported her and expressed the sentiment of grandchildren wanting more regular time with their grandparents, they moved within a month.

'Do you remember what Dad said when you came out to him Beth?'

'Everyone remembers,' mumbled Beth, twirling a strand of her hair, wondering if she should just hang up. She really didn't feel like going over minor details.

Jamie however felt the need to go over it again, as she had every time Beth brought up their father. And she was fully awake by now and exasperated with her sister. When Beth came out to their father after being suspended from school at the age of sixteen, he said 'Thanks for telling me.' He then made himself a cappuccino using the new machine Jamie had purchased for his birthday. He didn't offer anyone else a cup and took it with him into his study, slamming the door behind him. He hadn't spoken about Beth's revelation since and neither had he shown any inclination to learn about what it meant for her, especially in a school that was run by a board that refused to acknowledge the existence of queer people, especially within the confines of their ancient, illustrious walls. The school had standards that were set during a bygone era and they were intent on sticking to them and parents regularly made their homophobic views clear especially during Pride month.

When Beth came out, Jamie, who had come out as trans a few years earlier had moved out of the family home because she was disappointed and angered at her father's response to Beth and didn't feel the need to involve him in

any further conversations about her own journey to be who she was. Both Beth and Jamie had fallen out at the time because they had a different take on the reasons for their father's reticence to get involved in the lives of his daughters. Beth felt he needed time and encouragement while Jamie felt he needed a shove - a hard one. Jamie had taken the hard decision to distance herself from her father when he made a point of saying he preferred having at least one son and that he would be keeping the information from his faculty given his status and standing as the head of the department where there were vocal antagonistic voices about trans people and he didn't want to get involved in those discussions even if they were related to his daughter.

'I think it is worth taking the time to talk to him, explain things to him and establish a connection,' said Beth mulling over how she was actually going to do that given he hadn't shifted in his behaviour since she had first come out to him. It was her mother, Anna, who had taken the step to find another school for her and support her for the rest of her time there.

'You said that before. You're wasting your time. You've only just returned home, I can't imagine why. Didn't you enjoy university or at least the city? Leave, strike out someplace else and be happy,' said Jamie, rising to make herself a

coffee, having written off the rest of her morning, she knew she would be unable to rid herself of this irritating conversation unless she went for a long run. She certainly had no hope of going back to sleep.

'Give him a chance Jamie,' said Beth.

'I give up with you! These days all he cares about are his cats!'; on that final note Jamie ended the call.

Beth crossed her arms and rested deep into her sofa, scrunching up her face in thought. She had moved into an apartment a few streets away from the family home and was doing it up gradually. She found herself humming a tune but didn't know where she had heard it. She then decided to make a pot of tea to consider her next move. It was true that she had been at peace being away from home at university, but she wanted to be near her parents now, especially her mother.

Beth knew that while she couldn't imagine how her mother had managed to live with her father for so long, it was none of her concern and there were obviously things she didn't know about them, and she didn't want to know about those things either. Beth was someone who preferred to go ahead and make decisions on the theories she had about those around her rather than ask them directly about what was

going on and the reason for this was because she didn't trust anyone to tell her the truth. She firmly held that people were never candid about what they really thought, unless they were leaving a review of a restaurant they disliked, because they were afraid of not being liked. And she held on to this view even when evidence showed otherwise, like when her ex-girlfriend told her that she was leaving because Beth held on to issues and went over them in perpetuity even when there was nothing that could be done - Beth refused to give up or walk away - and while that was admirable for some things like reducing your home insurance quote, it was far from useful when someone no longer wanted to talk about something that they were uncomfortable with.

Beth now thought that her parents still took comfort in the presence of each other although they largely lived separate lives and slept in different ends of the house. She believed it was about company and having someone around and they had a shared history. Beth did wonder why her father had gradually shut down. Something shifted in him as the years went by and it changed everything at home. Beth felt that Jamie coped with the situation by establishing a distance between herself and her parents. She spent most of her time at a friend's house and it became rare to see her at home. Jamie was always close to Beth but kept her distance

when it came to their parents and she now lived a five hour drive away and Beth missed her, even though she rarely admitted it to anyone let alone herself.

Beth remembered wishing her family were happy all the time, so she decided that they were. She used to tell her friends that she lived in an idyllic home with an ever present mother who gave piano lessons and a father who was attentive when he wasn't lecturing at the local university. She spoke of long evenings spent with her parents and sister and the close unit they were. In reality by the time Beth turned thirteen there were arguments daily (sometimes more frequently at weekends). Beth would put on her earphones, turn up the music and walk off, refusing to acknowledge what was happening so that it would not contradict her made up view of her family.

Soon after, the arguments petered out because the house was large enough for Beth, Jamie, Anna and Stanley to keep a distance from each other. Beth and her mother however became closer - the distance when Beth was away studying had resulted in her mother reaching out to her, visiting her and sharing more about herself. Beth learned about how much her mother enjoyed writing poetry when she was young and listening to live music - both seemingly innocuous but lending a greater insight into her mother's

youth which Beth treasured and assiduously put in her 'my family' journal which she had been keeping since she was six. Their relationship deepened from there although her mother had yet to talk about the situation with her father and Beth hadn't asked.

Beth remained determined to repair her relationship with her father and that's how in desperation and hope she found herself adopting Madison, a black and white cat. The adoption was less about rescuing a cat and more about another attempt to rescue her relationship with her father.

Stanley had an affinity for cats which seemed to border on the theological. His twin feline acolytes, Philipe and Marx, served as his constant companions. Both were from a local rescue which Stanley felt explained their sinewy frames and lack of enthusiasm for anyone other than himself. He was the one who had shown them the care they needed - something they clearly didn't have - so of course they were always with him and no one else. He spoke to them, engaging in long conversations with the very vocal cats who also accompanied him every evening for his stroll around the neighbourhood. He was rarely without Philipe and Marx. If you queried the time he spent with them, he would respond that he found them to be worthy of his attention and intellect unlike so many of his students,

friends and relatives. He wouldn't say much else on the subject, preferring to shut himself in the study with Philippe, Marx and his extensive collection of books.

By adopting Madison, Beth thought that this would show she had something in common with her father. When Beth told Jamie about her plan, Jamie laughed uproariously reminding her of the time Beth tried to catnap Philippe and Marx, a scheme thwarted by Stanley's unexpected decision to take them with him to work. It was an event Beth chose to conveniently forget given she was exasperated at his lack of communication that day and just wanted the cats out of the way so she could talk to him - or that is what she told herself.

Madison had short fur and an especially long tail that she spent most days trying to catch, round and round she went after her own tail. She was of a healthy size and weight for her age, and was especially curious about her surroundings. She was a very vocal cat and spent most hours meowing as if orating a lengthy and complex speech. Anna was bemused when Beth conveyed her plan to her. But she went along with her daughter to the cat shelter. Madison had been there for over six months. They cared for her and loved her as best they could, but most people seemed unable to see Madison as being part of their family. And so while other

cats of similar colour and size were quickly adopted, Madison continued to reside in the small shelter. Madison had been found living at a local superstore. She had been hidden, fed and cared for by an employee until a manager noticed the disappearing food and called in the local cat shelter.

Madison had a black patch which looked like a map of France on her back - Anna thought it could be Spain. She also had a faint ring of black fur around her left eye which gave the impression she was wearing a monocle. Also one of her paws, the front left one, was black. Beth was sure that Stanley would take to Madison quickly. She knew as soon as she saw Madison that this would be the cat to help her reach her father and get them back to talking. Her mother didn't understand why Beth thought this to be the case since Madison looked nothing like Stanley's cats, but she was happy to go along having become used to her daughter's various attempts to engage with her sullen husband.

Madison liked to lie on the window sill and mew at people walking by. She ate well, slept regularly and played with her toys when she wasn't chasing her own tail. She also looked forward to her morning and late evening mooch in the communal garden. Madison didn't seem bothered if Beth

left the house although she sometimes appeared at the door to greet Beth with a lengthy series of meows in varying intensity.

Anna said that Madison was happy to have a stable home. Beth just had to make sure she always had food, water and a clean litter tray and play with her for at least thirty minutes a day. Anna was sure Beth had it all in hand even though Beth remained distracted by how she was going to introduce Madison to her father. She imagined what it would be like to share a beer with him on the patio with Madison, Philipe and Marx sat between them. In her mind he was smiling like he used to and eager to catch up with her and share news of his day. She decided to use a strategic introduction for maximum effect to kick-start their relationship in a new direction. She spoke about it at length with her mother who listened intently, almost politely, unwilling to dampen any of her daughter's enthusiasm even though she herself remained unconvinced about the expected result of events.

Anna took to Madison straight away. As a dog person she saw herself as very adaptable, so unlike cat people she thought who invariably seemed to need to have everything their own way. At least that is what she felt on observation of Stanley. Of course she did not say this out loud, she held the thought in her heart, satisfied with her ability to be

generous, patient and open minded regardless of the species.

Anna had been avoiding having conversations of substance with her husband Stanley for a while and didn't want to be the one to raise the issue of Beth and Madison. The distance between the couple had grown so wide she saw no reason to maintain a facade of communication even about their daughters. On some days he barely acknowledged her. She was stung by just being given a nod at first, not even a peck on the cheek, but now she was used to it and numb to his behaviour.

She remembered the last conversation they had. It was about an author they both loved. The first novel by the author was what brought them together - a shared love about the story of a young man falling in love with a city that he never wanted to move to in the first place. They felt the novel was written especially for them, both having migrated from other parts of the world. At the time they were studying and found it difficult to adjust to a new country. They didn't make friends easily and it seemed fitting that they finally found each other through a shared experience of loving the book and going along to a book signing where they bumped into one another.

Anna had read recently that the author had tripped, lost his balance and fallen on his way to a reading and had been in hospital ever since. She read the article to Stanley who was having a late breakfast. The article revealed that the author was spending his energies on getting better and writing about his experience. Anna remarked on how different the author's books had become since his first novel, the one she and Stanley had loved.

'His new book will be a waste of time. It is bound to be a sentimental piece about ageing and loss,' said Stanley, 'It would be better for him to write about other lives rather than focussing on himself?'

'It could be quite revealing,' said Anna, 'And maybe he needs to do this for himself ... I'd be interested in reading what he has to say. He still has an amazing skill of bringing even the most mundane topics to life.' On noticing that Stanley was still sitting at the table and hadn't walked off, which is what he had taken to doing every time Anna had tried to engage him in conversation of late, Anna decided to open the conversation up further. 'Would you consider writing about your life?' asked Anna.

Stanley held his large dark brown eyes steady on her, 'No.' He placed his plate in the kitchen sink, rolled up his sleeves

and washed it. He then went to his study and slammed the door. The sound reverberated such that Anna felt it in her bones.

That was the last conversation Anna had with Stanley and that was three months ago. She hadn't bothered him since. Even remembering the conversation was a source of great distress given the significance of the author to how they met. She felt deeply wounded by his lack of care and inability to give in even a little especially to one of her fondest memories.

On one of Anna's visits to check on Beth, she bought Madison a purple velvet collar, which Madison wriggled out of and chewed. Anna laughed heartily and gave Beth a tender hug. She always felt able to be herself and let go around her daughter, so unlike the times she spent around Stanley. She often wondered if he would suddenly snap at her or do something worse - he had become so distant she barely recognised the man she married. It was part of the reason she worried about Beth and her obsession with wanting to re-connect (as she called it) with her father. Anna thought it best that Beth simply ignore him. She didn't want her to be hurt and Anna didn't see Stanley changing any time soon.

Beth delayed introducing Madison to her father. She never seemed to find the right moment and she was a firm believer that there was always a right time and a right moment and a right thing to say. Getting it right meant getting what she wanted and making sure that everything went to plan. But no matter how many spreadsheets of dates, times, events and opportunities she put together, she simply didn't feel any of them seemed to signal the perfect time to go to Stanley with Madison.

She considered inviting him to hers, but he had turned down her requests when she first moved to her apartment. Then she wondered if she should go to see him at the university, but then she remembered when he had hauled her up in front of his class and introduced her as his wayward daughter who had returned with nothing else to do but sit in his class listening to lectures on social policy which she had no interest in. Beth was disheartened that day, although she was also thankful she had not followed in her father's footsteps when it came to choosing her degree. She hadn't ventured on the campus since.

By mid autumn Beth realised that she was spending too much time thinking about how to approach her father, and hadn't paid as much attention to her mother and Jamie. She recognised that they had both been very tolerant of her

thoughts about her father and her grand plans to get him talking again. In part her realisation came because she had become very attached to Madison and she didn't want to put her cat at risk of meeting Stanley especially since she had no idea how he would react. So, Beth decided to focus on her relationship with her mother, it needed to be nurtured too, she realised.

It was on that day that she suggested a road trip to visit Jamie - her and her mother, and of course Madison. Anna was genuinely surprised and touched. She never thought either of her daughters would want to spend time with her now they were grown. On seeing Anna's happiness, Beth recognised that her unhappiness about her father really did have an impact on her. It was clear that she needed support and love. Beth nodded at Madison, who seemed to concur that there were more important things to do than figuring out the inner workings of her father's mind.

Dear ~~father~~ Dad

I came to say 'hello' and then 'goodbye'. You were resting in your study listening to Elgar. Your cats Philipe and Marx were sitting on your chest. They rose and fell with your deep breaths. I did knock before I entered but you did not open your eyes.

I said, 'Dad? Dad? I just wanted to say goodbye before heading off on the trip with mum.'

You grunted, '... Yeah, I heard you.' Actually you didn't say that. I imagined you did. I also imagined that you rose, gave me a hug and wished me well. What you actually did was grunt. Your eyes remained shut.

Love Beth

Beth stopped scribbling her letter. She had come to pick up her mother for their trip and wanted to speak to her father. Philippe and Marx watched her. Their green eyes lit up like small torches, catching the sun through the window. Her father had the best room in the house for his study. It was the living room but he commandeered it saying he needed more space for his books. If they ever had visitors, they would have to sit in the front porch, the back room or the kitchen. Since he moved his things into the room, the door was shut the majority of the time and Philippe and Marx were his only visitors.

Beth paused and decided to be honest with herself. In reality, she knew that her father always locked himself away in his study. Even when she was living in the house, she'd have to come to the study if she wanted to speak to him. He

didn't answer her text messages either. So, why would it be any different today?

'Are you still here?' Stanley muttered.

Beth scrunched up the letter and lobbed it in the direction of the overflowing bin. It missed and landed on the floor. She perched on the edge of the sofa and eyed the bright red socks on Stanley's feet. She recognised them as the ones her mother knitted for him last Christmas. He had given her a thumbs up and left them next to the tree then went out for a stroll with his cats.

'Was there something else you wanted?' Stanley's eyes remained closed, his spectacles perched on the top of his head.

'No. Just soaking in the room. I like what you have done with the shelves. The black paint looks great. I'll borrow a couple of books for the ride. Mum and I are sharing the driving duties.' Beth looked out the window, watching her mother load another bag of food in the back of the camper van they hired. She gave Beth a wave to hurry up.

Beth selected two books from the shelves. She liked the colours and the heft of each book, one deep green and the other a light grey. Stanley a professor of social policy,

always said his selection of books were easy to dip in and out of, even if you didn't know anything about policy.

Beth paused at the door. She was feeling a rise of emotion and recognised it - she was still hoping for a hug goodbye. She was also imagining that her father would sit up pat the space next to him and ask her to tell him about the trip. She would tell him about what she had planned and he would come out to the camper van and meet Madison and hug Anna and wish them both a wonderful journey. She chided herself. She couldn't remember the last time her father hugged her. Philipe and Marx glared, their afternoon snooze having been rudely interrupted. Beth stuck her tongue out at them and flipped them the finger. She slammed the door hard behind her, holding back her tears. It wasn't long before Anna and Beth were on their way to see Jamie.

Stanley opened his eyes wide. Two pairs of green eyes - army green and emerald - stared back at him. He sat up and Philipe and Marx leapt onto the floor. They yawned, stretched, and then lay down on the carpet. Stanley laughed, taking pleasure in watching them position themselves just where the sunlight fell. He stretched and took a seat at his desk. He was content, much more so than he had been for a long while. He felt light and jovial without hearing Anna move about the house in the mouselike way

that she did - always cautious, never wanting to make more noise than she had to, always mindful of needing to be just right around others.

Stanley didn't consider that she wasn't like that when they first met and that perhaps it was his demeanour that had caused Anna to develop a more considered way of moving around a space that they once fashioned as theirs as a couple. He thought for a long while before deciding to place a call that he had been putting off. It wasn't that he didn't want to speak to his lover, it's just that he knew that things were about to change and he wasn't sure if it was what he wanted.

'Drew? I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time,' said Stanley, resting back in his chair.

'Stanley, I haven't heard from you in months. Months!'

'Yes, I know that.'

'What is it Stanley? I said what I needed to in the letter and you went silent.'

'I needed time to think.'

'You've had over a decade to think, to ponder, to hypothesise, to consider, to debate, to whatever! A decade, keeping me and everyone else in your life guessing.'

'Anna has gone on holiday with Beth. I finally have the house to myself for a while. Come over, we could talk and ...'

'No Stanley. Goodbye.'

Stanley sat on the ground and stroked his cats, deep in thought about how his life had unfolded. He was shocked by the sudden end to the phone call. Drew had never cut him off like that before - theirs was a relationship that had lasted through deception and distance. He was determined not to have any regrets and he checked himself on this several times a week.

He had provided a home for his family and given them as much time as he could although sometimes his disappointment at being with them rather than with Drew had caused disagreements. He had to acknowledge now that if he could find the courage to move out of the house and forge a life, his family would be happier. Stanley was unable to recognise that he had never really remained with them as a person, he was barely there, at a distance his thoughts and love elsewhere.

Stanley considered his career. Perhaps it wouldn't look badly in the faculty if he left Anna; he didn't need to prove anything anymore, he had established himself as a force in his subject area and times had changed. When had they, he considered, as if awakening from a deep sleep.

When he first moved to the country he wanted to stay and it wasn't just to be away from his domineering family, he wanted the freedom to live his life. He was young and fearful then, and when he met Anna he saw an out - marriage to satisfy the requirements of his family and an opportunity to build a respectable life in a new world. He never expected there to be children and more, much more. He lay on the floor staring at the ceiling, then rolled into a ball and broke into deep sobs. For the first time Stanley felt the gravity of years of hiding from his truth.

Dearest Drew

It has been several months since we last spoke. I miss you. I want to see you. We have loved each other for too long to let it end like this. Please call.

Yours in hope,

Stanley

BETWEEN THE LINES

Edward Minton was on his third pint of beer, having drained the first two effortlessly much to the surprise of the bartender, Joe, who knew that he normally just had one drink and even then it was a half and he left soon after, barely spending any time at the bar, although he sometimes stood in front of the juke box having put on a song - usually something melancholy that made other customers sigh audibly. Edward also rarely ate from the snack bowl but today had emptied it leaving a neat mound of pistachio shells on a napkin.

Joe raised an eyebrow in silent question. He prided himself on being the sort of bartender who made an effort to establish a rapport with his regulars. He polished a glass to a shine and lined it up with the others with meticulous care, resting the cloth over his shoulder.

'You okay, Ed? Joe asked, his voice one of concern and warmth. 'Going for a personal best tonight?' Joe winked setting down another beer.

Edward nodded absently. He had been thinking about his name and wondered whether it was an appropriate reflection of who he was. He felt disassociated from it since his divorce from Clarise. Now when someone called out to him 'Edward' sometimes 'Ed' occasionally 'Eddie', he would visibly cringe. He would have used his middle name but he disliked being called 'Arthur' as he felt it aged him unnecessarily. To most people, who either liked their name, disliked it or didn't care, it was just a name to either accept or perhaps change, but for Edward, as he aged, his name became a reminder of all of his life's disappointments, making him feel painfully ordinary and familiar without people actually knowing who he was. He drained his glass and reached for the one Joe had left him.

'Do you like your name, Joe?' Edward asked as an attempt to fill the space with a conversation without seeming needy of company.

Joe chuckled, a sound that seemed too light for the somber mood Edward was wrestling with. 'Yeah, I guess I do! I'm named after my mother's brother as it happens, and he's a great guy - always a smile and hug for anyone who needs one.'

Edward glanced at Joe over his glass and then surprised him by draining it in one go. He had decided against dragging out a conversation especially with the ever positive Joe - another reminder of his ex-wife and her consistent upbeat demeanour. Was he ever able to talk to her about his unhappiness without being told to look on the bright side? He left a handful of notes in the tip jar. Joe's thanks followed him as he made his way out, the cool night air rousing him into alertness as he made his way home, hands dug deep into his pockets.

As he walked, the streets seemed to confirm his introspective state, usually a tapestry of sounds, lights and movement, it felt oddly still, as if holding its breath. Edward's thoughts wandered back to the early hours of that morning, a time marked not by peaceful slumber but by his own restless thoughts. It wasn't the neighbour's cat, a regular nocturnal visitor, that had stirred him from sleep this time. He had come to find a reassuring comfort in the cat's company, a warm, purring presence in the lonely expanse of his bed. Initially, the cat's visits had been an unwelcome intrusion, a disruption filled with worries over fleas and scratches. It made Edward shut his window in the evenings to keep the cat out. But, he sometimes woke to sounds of scratching at the window, and it was the cat. Its persistence had turned annoyance into acceptance, and acceptance

into a quiet appreciation for the unexpected companionship. Edward felt special because the cat wanted to spend time with him. But it had taken over six months to get to this frame of mind.

Edward's journey through life had been marked by a predisposition to see the glass as half empty and overhead clouds as signalling the certainty of a downpour and a broken umbrella. Even in his youth, his inclination to focus on the negative had set him apart, from the optimism of others. Therapy had offered a chance to navigate his way towards a more positive or at least balanced outlook, to learn to appreciate life through a lens of gratitude and wonder rather than one of perpetual deficit and fault. He felt uncomfortable with himself and his experiences seemed to follow. This feeling didn't let up and became even more overwhelming at university when his peers were intent on experiencing everything life had to offer away from the prying eyes of their family. It was round about this time that Clarise entered his life, an infusion of positivity that had somehow seen through the depths of his pessimism or perhaps overlooked it or maybe even accepted it. If you were to ask his family, you would discover that they were startled by the courtship and were unable to reconcile Clarise's sunny disposition with Edward's cloudy demeanour. He was a good looking man, but that didn't

seem to be what attracted Clarise to him. His two brothers wondered how she tolerated his constant negativity that imprinted itself on him, his face sullen and drawn down, his shoulders hunched as if to close himself off and laughter a rare occurrence. Yet, love, or something like it, had bloomed, leading them down the aisle and into a conventional shared life that seemed to promise change.

Edward's mother, after considerable thought, decided that Clarise had seen him as a puzzle she could solve and that was the attraction. Clarise was upbeat and positive countered Edward's father, perhaps opposites need each other. He was more optimistic about the prospect of the marriage lasting than Edward's mother. Both Edward's brothers were just glad he no longer accompanied them at the weekends to bars and clubs as it invariably made it difficult for them to enjoy themselves. Edward, the better looking of the three would attract attention as quickly as he sent it away with his negativity.

After they married, Clarise and Edward moved to a four bedroom city apartment close to his workplace. It made sense for Edward as he disliked public transport and all the contact with others it entailed. Clarise didn't mind at first but after their second year of marriage she insisted they move, so they would be less central and have more access

to green spaces. Edward wasn't sure at the time what had brought this on, there were green spaces where they were and he was settled in their home. But rather than enquire and discuss the move further, he went along with it and then complained about his new route to work because he needed to take the underground and sometimes the bus.

When Clarise left him, Edward stayed on in their apartment and continued to grumble, mainly to himself, about his journey to work and back. He felt stuck and unable to move even though he wanted to leave because of the embarrassed looks he felt he saw in the eyes of his neighbours, most of whom had become friends of Clarise, choosing to see Edward as an extension to her rather than a person in his own right, which made sense given that Edward was reluctant when it came to socialising with them.

His once stable and respectable home lay in tatters, and it was reflected in how he had begun to feel about himself, which was far worse than before he met Clarise.

The morning after indulging in an uncharacteristic amount of alcohol, Edward faced the consequences with a pounding headache. He looked over to his side and saw the neighbour's cat. 'You're the only one who tolerates me,' he

muttered as the cat purred, utterly indifferent. Edward sighed. Rather than break with routine, he embraced the pre-dawn silence of the neighbourhood and went for his usual jog. At four o'clock in the morning his tall frame cut through the cold, his breath mingling with the chilled mist. After a quick cup of coffee he made his way to the underground getting off at his stop a few minutes before seven.

He strode across the road, head down, barely noticing a passing cyclist who swerved to avoid him and cursed loudly. Edward worried that the cyclist would circle round for a confrontation, so he rushed hurriedly to his workplace, pushing the rotating doors when he didn't need to, and getting stuck as a result. Security buzzed him through the side door shaking their heads. He showed them his pass, thanked them and wished them for the day. They didn't look up and didn't offer a greeting, otherwise absorbed in the glow of their screens. Edward's presence, despite his imposing height of 6 feet 2 inches and the sharp cut of his suit that should have commanded attention, seemed to dissolve into the background. Pausing, Edward tried to focus so he would not get stuck in the turnstile, the second layer of security - when he was flustered it did happen. His concern was interrupted as someone pushed past him sending him staggering against the glass partition of the

security booth. Straightening his tie, Edward's expression hardened. His good looks and height were traits that, in any other person, might have drawn eyes, stirred whispers, or sparked conversations. Yet, for Edward, these attributes seemed to fade into the ether the moment he entered a room. It wasn't just his physical presence that was overlooked but him, his very being, entirely. As he made his way into the elevator, Edward couldn't help but wonder if it was his outward demeanour that rendered him invisible or if it was the world's way of responding to the storm of pessimism and discomfort that raged silently within him. Rising through the building, he watched the elevator numbers climb, 'Great, another ride spent contemplating my life choices. Maybe I should have just taken the stairs — fewer existential dilemmas that way.'

Edward's elevator journey to the fifteenth floor was marked by an almost ritualistic inspection of his surroundings. The elevator, a capsule of polished efficiency, bore no trace of the city's chaos with its gleaming buttons and spotless floor. When the doors opened he was met with the quiet of the reception area, devoid of its usual morning hustle. Edward navigated the familiar path to his office, the silence of the corridor amplifying the solitude he felt. Behind the closed door of his office, Edward lost himself in his emails, and caught up on work making use of the emptiness of the

early hour. He absentmindedly called for coffee, forgetting that the day had yet to truly begin and most staff hadn't arrived. He had become increasingly disconnected from the simpler rhythms of life which included his erratic time keeping and inability to sleep properly.

Mitch Daniels was already there. He and Edward had met at university and joined the company at the same time. Mitch, an anchor in the pre-workday quiet, his presence was a constant, his dedication outpacing even the earliest of mornings. Edward retraced his steps, drawn to Mitch's office, a space that contrasted sharply with his own. Mitch's office welcomed him into a world that seemed to orbit on a different axis, one that was relaxed and free from anxiety and suffused with positivity.

Mitch, ensconced in his domain, greeted Edward with a gesture towards the coffee machine. Mitch was on a telephone call and spoke through a headset, he seemed at ease and was smiling through it. To Edward, Mitch always seemed like a man who was entirely at home in himself. The view from Mitch's window, obscured by the persisting fog, seemed a metaphor for Edward's own vision of himself—blurred and indistinct. Yet, Mitch navigated his conversations with a grace that belied the greyness outside,

his demeanour unaffected by the weather or the weight of expectations.

When Mitch finally disentangled himself from his call, the ease with which he leaned back in his chair and surveyed the world below spoke volumes. Edward couldn't help but marvel at Mitch's unchanged vitality, a stark contrast to the wear and tear he saw in his own reflection.

Their careers at the company had mirrored each other in progression but diverged wildly in substance. Edward, ever the emblem of corporate success, adorned his life with the symbols of his status, while Mitch navigated the same waters with a minimalism that Edward found both admirable and unsettling. Mitch's choice of a simpler office, his disdain for unnecessary travel, and his comfort in the digital realm highlighted a contentment that Edward found elusive.

As Edward observed Mitch, the envy simmered beneath a veneer of admiration. Mitch's easy smile, the casual tousle of his hair, and those green eyes that seemed to hold a secret to living that Edward couldn't grasp—all of it served as a constant reminder of what Edward felt he lacked and failed to secure through years of observation and attempts to improve. The accolades they shared, the promotions they both received, did little to bridge the chasm Edward felt

within himself. Mitch moved through life with a confidence that Edward envied, a man sure of his place in the world, while Edward found himself perpetually on the outside, looking in, struggling to decipher the language of his own being.

Mitch caught Edward's gaze with his, the light reflecting off his green eyes and momentarily capturing Edward in a silent acknowledgment of their shared past and diverging paths. 'You know, if we ever need someone to cheer up the room, we'll make sure not to call you, Ed,' Mitch teased.

Unaware of how intensely he had been staring, Edward quickly broke the connection, his cheeks warming with embarrassment. He took a seat across from Mitch, attempting to mask his discomfort with a practiced smile. As they delved into the agenda for the week, discussing projects and scanning the quarterly figures, Mitch's command over the details was evident. He had not only completed his draft report but had done so with an acumen that underscored his reputation. Sharing the report with Edward, Mitch's actions felt like a quiet exhibition of his prowess, though Edward tried to remind himself that Mitch's intentions were always rooted in generosity. 'You never regret being kind,' Mitch would say, a mantra that made him a beloved figure in the office.

Edward thumbed through the report, each page consolidating Mitch's skill and the swift progress he'd made. Admitting to himself, Edward recognised a twinge of jealousy in amongst his professional admiration. Mitch had a way of elevating everyone's work, including his own, positioning his colleagues in the spotlight of success alongside himself. It was a trait that Edward knew he should commend, yet it stirred an uncomfortable mix of respect and resentment within him.

'Have you heard about the big opportunity coming up in the Paris office,' Mitch casually mentioned, his tone light.

Edward's interest piqued, he nodded, the report momentarily forgotten as he contemplated the prospect. 'Are you thinking of going for it?' he asked. Edward's movements were automatic as he rose for more coffee, a part of him clinging to the ritual of the shared space between them.

Mitch leaned back, the casual arch of his body speaking volumes about his comfort in making decisions that felt right to him, regardless of external allure. 'Nah, I think I'll stay put,' he said, his smile genuine and devoid of any regret. 'Plus, there's Sarah, she loves it here. I'd have a hard time separating her from this city ... However, if you went

for it, I would need to make regular trips to Paris,' Mitch's voice tailed off. He looked to Edward to see his reaction.

Edward was otherwise preoccupied with his own thoughts. The mention of Sarah added another layer to Mitch's decision, highlighting his values and priorities outside of work. It was these moments, these glimpses into Mitch's life and the clarity with which he navigated it, that Edward found both admirable and painfully enviable. Mitch lived with a sense of identity and purpose that Edward felt he was still searching for, each decision Mitch made a reminder of the self-assurance Edward wished he could feel.

As Edward returned to his seat, the warmth of the coffee cup in his hands did little to dispel the chill of introspection. Mitch's ease with life's ebbs and flows, his ability to cherish the present while being unburdened by what could be, stood in stark contrast to Edward's own restlessness and uncertainty. In Mitch's confidence, Edward saw the mirror of his own doubts.

In Edward's eyes, Mitch's life was one framed by the kind of narrative often found only in novels and films. Married to a strikingly beautiful and successful classical musician, Mitch seemed to embody a balance of personal and professional fulfilment that Edward had longed for but never quite

achieved even though he felt he did his best to strive for it. The dissolution of Edward's marriage had left him deeply shamed, the aftermath echoing through his life in waves of emotional turmoil, physical exhaustion, and financial strain. University had been a crossroads for them both — Mitch finding Sarah and Edward meeting Clarise. They had navigated those early years as a close-knit group until the unraveling of Edward's marriage had redrawn lines, leaving him adrift from a circle that had once offered familiarity, security and relevance..

'I mentioned the job because of you. There's nothing keeping you here, Ed. It might be the fresh start you need, especially after everything with Clarise. Paris could offer you a chance to spread your wings. They'd be lucky to have you.'

Edward could sense something beyond genuine concern in Mitch's suggestion. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He ignored it — where kindness was meant to heal, it only seemed to irritate.

Attempting to shift the focus, Edward asked, 'How is Clarise these days?'

'Oh now, it's been three years, Ed. You need to move on.'

'I have,' Edward snapped back, quicker and sharper than he intended, his defences flaring up in an instant.

Mitch's smile was tinged with apology, his demeanour softening. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstep. I just... I want to see you happy, to find your rhythm, you know?'

Gratitude mingled with reluctance as Edward considered Mitch's words. 'Thank you. I'll look into the job. Perhaps you're right. Paris could be just the change I need.'

Mitch's support was unwavering, 'I'm here to help in any way I can. And remember, we'll still be working together. Distance doesn't change that, we'll probably see each other more often as I'll certainly be making trips to the Paris office.'

Edward nodded, a sense of resolution mingling with the myriad of feelings the conversation had unearthed. 'Yes,' he acknowledged, standing to leave. 'I'll catch you later, Mitch.'

As Edward retreated to his office, the gravity of their exchange pressed heavily on his thoughts. Mitch's life, painted in strokes of contentment and fulfilment, stood in stark contrast to his own canvas of discontent. Rather than seeing Mitch's suggestion of a move to Paris as the possibility of new beginnings, Edward interpreted it as a

subtle exile, a polite nudge from someone he considered not just a colleague but one of the few steadfast presences in his life. Was this Mitch's way of telling him to find his own way, to seek out happiness elsewhere? He was adrift as it was, would it be so vastly different in Paris.

Back in the sanctuary of his office, Edward vented his frustration on the high-backed chair, thumping it hard many times and then screaming into a sofa pillow. Surrounded by the trappings of success—a spacious office that could host dual meetings, a high-ranking position, and the deference of his assistants—Edward found little solace. His request for his usual coffee and breakfast came out more as an order than a request, a tone he attributed to his position rather than his current turmoil. He was painfully aware of his assistants' preference for Mitch, a fact made evident by their repeated transfer requests and eagerness to take on extra work coming through Mitch's office.

Trying to regain his composure, Edward paced the room and paused by the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a panoramic view of the city's skyline. The prospect of starting anew in Paris beckoned with promises of adventure and new connections, yet the thought of uprooting his life, of stepping into longer hours and unfamiliar territories, anchored his resolve in place. The familiar, no matter how

stifling, held a certain allure. He was used to his routine, and more often than not, was not surprised by how the day turned out, as unhappy as he was, he found solace in its certainty.

For a moment, he allowed himself to entertain the notion of change, to visualise a life beyond the immediate confines of his current reality. Paris could perhaps offer what he had been unwittingly searching for: a chance to discover who he was outside the definitions he had clung to. The signifiers of happiness he had accumulated, from his significant role at the company to the ostentatious office and the semblance of a stable marriage, had failed to fill the void within. He could find out what he wanted; was it something that was unlike what his status and standing had pushed him towards?

Edward's reflections were interrupted by the stark realisation that Mitch might indeed be right. He was rooted to the past, unable to move forward. The acknowledgment was hard to accept, especially as memories of Clarise and their marriage surfaced. He had been blindsided by the divorce, convinced of the perfection of their union and how respected they were as a couple until the very foundation crumbled beneath him. How had he been so oblivious to

the fractures? To the gaping chasm between the life he believed he led and the reality of it?

Edward sighed, a sound that seemed to carry the weight of his revelations. It had been three years, yet the passage of time had done little to bridge the gap between perception and reality. The journey ahead, whether in Paris or elsewhere, loomed as an uncertain path towards self-discovery and, possibly, towards a happiness that was authentic, not merely constructed from external achievements and societal markers. As the city stretched out before him, a tapestry of lives unfolding in countless narratives, Edward couldn't help but wonder about his own story. Could a change of scenery be the catalyst for a change within? It was a question that lingered, unanswered, as he considered the possibility of stepping into the unknown.

Edward's departure from work was a blur, the city streets mere backdrops to the turmoil within as he made his way to the design school where Clarise taught. He wasn't aware of the journey so much as he was consumed by the purpose of it, his mind a chaos of unsorted feelings and half-formed thoughts. As he navigated the familiar path to her office, images of their shared past—doors once opened together, stairs once ascended in laughter—flooded his

consciousness, a stark reminder of the distance now between them.

Since the day Clarise had walked out of their life, promising only legal correspondence to follow, Edward had maintained a respectful silence. The home they had built together gradually emptied in her absence, leaving behind a shell filled with objects devoid of warmth, items that spoke more of Edward's tastes than any shared history. It struck him, how much of their life together, the vibrancy and the texture of it, had been woven by Clarise. Her energy, her social circle, her passion for life had infused their existence with colour and connection, leaving Edward in a grayscale world post-divorce. The realisation was a sharp contrast to his life preoccupied with work, a life that now, more than ever, felt hollow and without resonance of anything that he was part of.

He arrived at her office, unprepared for the confrontation but propelled by a need for closure - or was it understanding? Peering through the glass, he saw Clarise, as poised and focused as ever, a sight that unsettled him.

'Clarise, it's good to see you,' he said, breathing slowly and with intention. He felt light headed and nauseous. She looked as well turned out as the day they met. Her black

hair framing her small face. Her large brown eyes focussed on him, her gaze lingering, a silent acknowledgment of the shared history before returning to her task.

'Edward. This is a surprise,' she said.

As he sat, Edward felt an odd detachment observing his own actions, as if part of him were watching this moment unfold from afar. 'I just wanted to ask you why you left,' he said, striving for a steadiness he didn't feel.

'It wasn't working,' she replied simply, her attention still partially on her screen. She too dispensed with the social pleasantries unwilling to have a drawn out conversation with him.

'In what way?' Edward pressed, noticing the bright red nail varnish, a detail so trivial yet so alien, signalling a Clarise he no longer knew.

Clarise paused, considering her response. 'What is this about, Edward? It's been a while.'

'I'm thinking of taking up a role in the Paris office and ... well there are lots of things for me to consider, one of which is finding out a bit more about why we parted ways.'

Clarise sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. 'You want to have this conversation now? It's been three years Edward. Just let it go.'

Edward persisted, 'Why did you leave?'

'We really had nothing in common Edward and that became more apparent the longer we were together. I also didn't want to work on it anymore. It felt one sided and I'm sure you got that much right?'

Clarise's response was a blow, not because it was unexpected, but because it confirmed Edward's deepest fear: their marriage had been more about fulfilling a societal expectation than a true union of hearts. 'You broke us ... I broke when you left. It's been ... difficult. But I always thought you went because there was someone else. I was certain there was. That was why I didn't say anything. I didn't want to know,' Edward confessed, his voice a mix of accusation and vulnerability.

Clarise's admission that there wasn't someone else, that she simply gave up on them, was a stark, painful truth. 'Do you know what you even want Edward?' asked Clarice, frustrated by the interruption to her otherwise peaceful day. 'Well? What is it about us that you miss so much?'

Edward glared at her, as if she were asking him something that were so obvious. Yet, in that moment he recognised that he didn't actually have an answer to her question and he wasn't missing her as much as feeling adrift without a sense of being part of a couple. As he walked away, the encounter with Clarise not providing the solace he sought, he was left with a deeper realisation that he had never truly known Clarise, nor himself. His pursuit of their life together had been misguided, rooted in external markers of success and expectations of others rather than genuine emotional connection and an understanding of his own needs and he had certainly overlooked hers. He had followed a map that wasn't his and he hadn't considered developing his own. Instead he stewed in his pessimism as if it were a blanket woven just for him, rather than step out from under it to seek pastures new that would throw light on his own needs, desires and ambitions.

Edward dialled Mitch's number, his voice steady as he conveyed his apologies for not returning to work that day, promising his presence the following morning. After hanging up, a sense of aimlessness imbued him, guiding his steps not towards the solitude of his home but to the familiar haven of Joe's bar. He pushed open the door and loosened his tie, surprised by the vibrant hues of streamers that greeted him, their colours bold against the soft

lighting. The air was alive with the thrum of music, a beat that seemed to pulse with the promise of celebration. The furniture had been rearranged to create an open, communal space, and at the far end of the bar stood Joe, his attire a playful nod to the festivities with a surf shirt and straw cowboy hat.

Edward's approach was measured, each step taken with a newfound curiosity. 'Are you open?' he inquired, his usual reserve softened by the inviting atmosphere.

Joe's laughter was a warm welcome. 'Hey, good to see you, Ed. Not just yet, but you are welcome to stay. We're just getting ready to welcome the revellers for later this evening.'

'Oh?' said Edward, sitting at the bar.

'It's Pride week Ed! We are supporting the event by kicking off with a beach themed disco today to raise funds for a local charity,' smiled Joe. 'Now, what can I get you?'

Shrugging off his jacket, Edward surrendered to the moment. 'Anything. Anything you recommend will be just great Joe,' he replied, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth for the first time in what felt like ages. He surveyed

the surroundings and felt a sudden sense of release and comfort.

In the warm embrace of the bar, under the kaleidoscope of Pride decorations, Edward felt a transformation within himself, as if someone had flicked on a switch inside of him. Joe, with his ever-welcoming smile, crafted a cocktail that seemed to capture the essence of the celebration—a vibrant concoction that sparkled under the lights, topped with a whimsical rainbow parasol. ‘Enjoy the drink, on the house,’ Joe said, his voice infused with the festive spirit. ‘Stay as long as you like. You might find it enlightening!’ He took a cowboy hat from behind the counter and placed it on Ed’s head with a flourish. ‘There, you’re all ready for the evening now!’

With each sip, Edward felt the burdens of the past falling away replaced by a burgeoning sense of clarity that also had a sense of urgency. Where had he been all this time he wondered? As he settled into the bar stool, Edward's gaze wandered over the magazines and notices spread across the bar, each announcing the myriad events of Pride week. He scanned through them and made a note to go to some of the other events that week.

After his second cocktail when the festivities began in earnest and people filled the establishment, Edward felt settled for the evening and joined in the celebrations. He found himself engaging in conversations, a stark departure from his usual reticence. Here, in Joe's bar he found his presence was acknowledged, his thoughts listened to and heard. It was a revelation—to be seen and heard not as a background fixture but as an integral part of the mosaic of faces and stories. He felt more grounded in himself and happier to reveal who he was to those he spoke to. He even felt himself stand up straighter than usual and took comfort in his body, shifting easily through the different conversations. The comfort he felt came from a sense of the familiar in an environment that he hadn't been in before. It felt like he had released his breath and was home.

Drawn to the bar garden, Edward discovered a space transformed into a canvas of light and movement. As he navigated through others on the dance floor, the vibrant strings of lights overhead cast a soft glow that seemed to spotlight Lucien. His movements were a captivating blend of poise and allure, pulling Edward closer without a word. Edward began dancing, moving closer to Lucien.

'Impressive dance moves for someone holding what looks like the most dangerous drink in the place,' Lucien teased, nodding at Edward's glass.

'It's actually just a sparkling water,' Edward confessed, 'I'm practicing for when I really let loose.'

Lucien smiled extending his hand, 'Hi, I'm Lucien'.

Edward felt a rush of exhilaration as he took Lucien's hand. 'Edward,' he replied, a bit breathlessly, as he allowed himself to be drawn into the music, a mix of deep bass and shimmering synths, setting the scene for what felt like an inevitable connection.

'You move really well for someone who seems like he was standing on the sidelines a minute ago,' Lucien teased gently, leading them through a series of steps.

Edward laughed, the sound mingling with the music. 'Maybe I just needed the right partner,' he said, astounded by his forthrightness and glad at the same time.

Lucien's eyes sparkled at the compliment. 'I hope I can live up to the expectation then,' he said, pulling Edward a little closer. 'So, what brings you to Joe's tonight?'

'I... I was just passing,' Edward confessed, his usual reservations ebbing away under Lucien's encouraging gaze. 'Erm .. it seemed like the right time.'

'It's all about finding the right time, isn't it?' Lucien mused, spinning Edward around playfully before reeling him back in. 'But hey, no pressure. Tonight is about enjoying the moment, being who we are, or maybe who we want to be.'

Edward nodded, feeling a surprising surge of freedom. 'And who are you, Lucien? When you're not being the dance floor's prince charming?'

Lucien's laugh was easy and open, much like his demeanour. 'Oh, I'm many things. An artist by day, a dreamer by night. A believer in magic moments and good music. And you, Edward?'

'I'm a bit of a dreamer too ... although one that has been lost for a while,' Edward admitted, finding himself sharing more than he anticipated.

'Sounds intriguing. You'll have to tell me more sometime. But for now,' Lucien paused, his expression softening as the song shifted to a slower, more intimate beat, 'let's just dance, Edward.'

As the night deepened and the music wove through a variety of rhythms, the barriers between them dissolved. They danced through songs and silences alike, each moment building on the last, a promise of something new yet distinctly familiar. In Lucien's presence, Edward found not just the joy of the celebration but a profound sense of being seen, perhaps for the very first time. Their conversation, easy and genuine, spanned hours, time marked not by the passing minutes but by the exchange of smiles, the shared laughter, and the comforting warmth of connection. It was a shared time that drew Edward out of himself and into the tangible essence of the evening - it felt like he was no longer invisible and had a presence in the world, one he was happy to occupy.

Returning indoors for a drink, Joe's cheerful 'Hey Ed' met Edward's ears, but now, standing there with Lucien, Edward realised his name didn't bother him anymore it felt like he was around those, including Joe, who did see him for who he was. He felt a surprising and welcome internal peace and for him, the bar was more than a backdrop for celebration; it was a mirror reflecting the person he was becoming—open, accepting, and ready to explore who he was. As Edward sat there with Lucien, taking in the laughter, the conversations, and the sheer joy of the moment, he realised that this was what home felt like for him. It wasn't in the

grand gestures or the titles that adorned his business card. It was here, among friends and strangers united in celebration.

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The morning sun shone through the window, casting a gentle glow across the room where Edward awoke. His head was resting on Lucien's chest. He opened his eyes to come face to face with the neighbour's cat, purring contently. It seemed the presence of the cat was bridging the gap between old comforts and new beginnings.

'Your cat? She's very sweet,' Lucien remarked with a smile, his fingers lightly tracing patterns through Edward's hair.

Embarrassment warmed Edward's cheeks as he corrected, 'She belongs to the neighbour but seems to prefer it here sometimes I'm glad you stayed,' he confessed, his gaze lingering on Lucien, who was momentarily preoccupied with closing his book.

'Have you been awake long? Maybe I should get us something for breakfast... Do you want breakfast?' His words tumbled out in a nervous rush, accompanied by a hopeful smile.

'How are you, Edward? Are you okay?' Lucien's question cut through the morning haze, grounding Edward in the moment.

He looked into Lucien's eyes, feeling a profound sense of connection that went beyond the physical closeness they shared. 'I'm better than okay. I feel alive in a way that's new to me. It's like I'm finally starting to understand who I am,' he confessed, his voice threaded with a mix of wonder and apprehension.

Lucien smiled, his hand still playing with strands of Edward's hair. 'It's beautiful to see. You're opening up, not just to me, but to yourself. It's not easy, I know.'

'Yes. Well, my body is tingling all over, as if it's humming. Looking at you... I just want to hold you,' Edward admitted, his voice a mix of exhilaration and vulnerability. It was a sensation unfamiliar, yet deeply emotional, a combination of happiness, nerves, and an anxious anticipation for what might unfold.

Lucien responded with a soft kiss, a gentle affirmation of their connection. 'Give yourself time, Edward. I'm not going anywhere. I like you, okay?' His words soothed the swirl of emotions within Edward.

Edward nodded, his initial embarrassment fading into a more serious contemplation. 'It's scary, though. I've lived so long under a sort of... invisibility cloak. Showing the real me to the world, and even to myself, it feels like stepping out onto a stage that has been waiting for me all along.'

'And that's perfectly okay. Everyone's story has its own pace. Just know that here, with me, you're safe to explore, to be,' Lucien reassured.

In response, Edward pulled Lucien closer and nuzzled his neck. It elicited a warm glow within him, an instinctive yearning for closeness. 'I never want to look away from you,' he murmured, surrendering to the sensation of Lucien's touch, each contact igniting sparks of joy and desire.

Lucien's laughter filled the space between them, light and easy. 'Incidentally, I love what you've neglected to do with the place,' he said, casting an affectionate glance around the room that had remained unchanged since Clarise's departure.

'It's been like this since she left,' Edward acknowledged. Lucien's gaze followed Edward's, taking in the room with an understanding eye.

'Ah! Well, these things take time,' Lucien replied with empathy, slipping into his boxers and stretching. 'Come on. Let's grab breakfast on your way to work. You are working today, right?'

By the time Edward got to work there was a noticeable change in him. A buoyancy in his step, a lightness in his heart, as if he were somehow floating above the ground and he was smiling widely. He felt expansive rather than restricted, his body moved freely and he took up space rather than try to hide himself. The office, with its familiar sights and sounds, seemed different now, as if viewed through a lens polished by the morning's revelations. Edward's interactions were touched by a newfound confidence, his smiles genuine, his gaze direct. Colleagues immediately noticed the subtle shift, and responded in kind.

Edward felt like he was emerging from a long slumber, finding his wings in the light of a new day. This was not just a chapter in his life; it was the beginning of a story he had never dared to consider, a story where he could finally breathe, be himself, in a world that felt like it had been waiting for him all along.

Edward stood by his office windows, lost in thought, gazing at the ceaseless flow of traffic below. A sense of calm had

settled over him, buoyed by a message from Lucien about their dinner plans. Despite his desire not to rush, Edward couldn't shake off the need for reassurance about where he and Lucien stood. He had enjoyed their discussions and felt a deep draw to be in Lucien's presence, and learn more about him. It was a pull towards another that was startling to him and yet the intensity felt right.

Mitch's knock on the door snapped Edward back to the present. 'You okay, Edward? We missed you at the meeting this morning,' Mitch enquired, his concern apparent.

Edward, caught off-guard, offered a sheepish apology. 'Sorry! I overslept and just got in an hour ago.'

Mitch, arched a brow - Edward had never been late for anything let alone work. Mitch mentioned Clarise, adding a layer of discomfort to the conversation.

Edward brushed it off with ease, 'Oh that! I just wanted to tie up loose ends and we spoke briefly. Believe me that's history now.' Edward pushed back his hair with both hands, trying to focus on the moment because all he could think about was Lucien. However, Mitch's intent to delve deeper became clear as he subtly closed the door, signalling a shift in the conversation's tone.

'I erm saw you last night at the bar. You were drinking alone?' Mitch probed, his casual demeanour contradicting the weight of his words.

Edward was taken aback by Mitch's presence at Joe's and the implication of his questions. He felt a rising anxiety. 'You were at Joe's?'

'Briefly. I was meeting a friend,' Mitch said.

Edward, confused but not wanting to pry said 'Okay. '

'If you ever need to talk about anything in confidence you know you can come to me right?' said Mitch, going round the desk and placing his hand on Edward's shoulder. Mitch's offer, accompanied by the firmness of his touch, only heightened Edward's discomfort.

Edward stood up, moving towards the door, 'I will do that Mitch. Thank you for offering.'

'Did you enjoy your time at Joe's?'

'I go there quite often and last night was ... yes, I enjoyed it,' said Edward with a smile. 'I must be getting on though, catch up on what I missed this morning.'

Mitch paused at the door, looking back at Edward, before leaving.

In that moment, Edward's perspective shifted. He recognised how his own negativity had clouded his view of those around him, including Mitch. The encounter, brief as it was, acted as a catalyst, peeling away self-imposed barriers and revealing a desire for authenticity long suppressed. Determined to embrace his truth, Edward made a decision that would mark a new chapter in his life. The anticipation of seeing Lucien not only filled him with a sense of urgency but also with a resolve to confront his past and present. The corporate façade and societal expectations that had once defined his existence seemed trivial now, as he prepared to face his parents.

The journey was a blur, each stage bringing him closer to a revelation that he felt he needed to make after feeling lost for so long. As he arrived at their door, the weight of the moment settled over him. This was more than a coming out; it was an assertion of who he was. Stepping through the familiar doorway, Edward was met with the comforting sights and smells of his childhood home. His parents, ever attentive, sensed something different in their son's demeanour. The conversation that followed was one of revelation and acceptance, of questions and

understanding. For Edward, it was as if he were speaking a language he had only just learned but had known all along. The tension that had built up, the fear of rejection, began to dissipate as his parents listened, not without their own concerns and surprises, but ultimately with love. Leaving his parents' house, Edward felt a lightness within him he hadn't known possible. It felt like his previous form had crumbled and now he finally stood up his stature and composure for all to see. The exchange had not been without its challenges, but the future seemed clearer, the path ahead less daunting. He realised that he was not just taking a step towards someone he was beginning to care for, but also towards a version of himself he liked and even loved.

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Mitch sat quietly in his office, the glow from his computer screen casting shadows across his thoughtful face. The office was still; the hum of the air conditioning and the distant sound of late-night traffic were the only sounds punctuating the silence. He scrolled through his emails mechanically, but his mind was elsewhere, lingering on the earlier encounter with Edward.

Edward had seemed different - vibrant and self-assured. Mitch had noticed the transformation, a shift so sudden it

was impossible to ignore. He remembered the first time they had met at university, how Edward's quiet intensity had intrigued him. Over the years, Mitch had watched him battle through personal and professional challenges, always keeping a respectful distance, but now something felt different, and it tugged at Mitch's conscience.

As he leaned back in his chair, Mitch's thoughts drifted to the past. There had been moments, fleeting and subtle, where he had felt a connection to Edward that went beyond mere friendship or collegial camaraderie. He recalled a night years ago when they had stayed up late working on a project, the way Edward had laughed at his jokes and the warmth of his smile. Mitch had dismissed those feelings as momentary lapses, the byproduct of long nights and too much coffee. But seeing Edward now, so changed and full of life, those old feelings resurfaced with an intensity that was hard to ignore.

Mitch sighed, closing his laptop with a soft click. He stood and walked over to the window, the reflection staring back at him was a man caught between his desires and the reality of his circumstances. He knew his feelings for Edward might never be reciprocated, yet he couldn't help but wonder what might have been if circumstances were different.

In an attempt to clear his mind, Mitch picked up an old photograph from his desk drawer. It was a picture of him and Edward at a company retreat, both of them smiling broadly with an arm around each other. Mitch touched the surface of the photo, tracing the outlines of Edward's face. He wondered if Edward had ever sensed his feelings, ever noticed the lingering looks or the times Mitch found excuses just to be around him.

The phone on his desk buzzed, snapping Mitch out of his reverie. He answered it with a practiced smile, but his heart wasn't in the conversation. As he spoke, his gaze drifted back to the photograph, and he made a decision. He would talk to Edward, lay his feelings out in the open. It was a risk, but Mitch was tired of hiding, tired of wondering.

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Lucien spent the day trying to focus on his dual roles, each task usually flowing into the next with the practiced ease of a seasoned artist and educator. But today, his emotions were overwhelming and he felt an excitement he hadn't in a very long while. He did his best to navigate the complex negotiations involved in finalising art deals with a calm demeanour, his keen eye for detail ensuring the integrity of each piece under his care. Meanwhile, the administrative

duties of running art education programmes required a different kind of focus, one that involved nurturing the creative spark in others - a role he both cherished and found challenging, especially today.

Despite the day's successes, Lucien's mind was focussed on Edward and it was hard to put their recent experience behind him. There was an undeniable pull, a connection that seemed to run much deeper than the casual conversations and fleeting encounters he had grown used to in the years following his last significant relationship. That relationship, a vibrant tapestry of passion and discord, had taught him the precarious nature of love, leaving him cautious about whom he allowed into his life. The scars from those emotional upheavals had not fully healed, making him wary of the vulnerabilities that came with new attachments.

As an immigrant artist, Lucien had often felt the sting of being categorised, his work sometimes constrained within the narrow expectations of those who could not see past his heritage. This struggle to be seen for his true self, rather than the exoticized versions others constructed, had been a constant battle and disappointment. It was this feeling of invisibility that made his connection with Edward so poignant. Edward, with his own burgeoning self-discovery

and his refreshing honesty, mirrored Lucien's yearnings for authenticity and recognition.

By evening, as Lucien began the familiar ritual of preparing dinner, his thoughts were tinged with both anticipation and fear. The kitchen, usually a place of solitary reflection, felt different tonight. He moved with a slower, more deliberate pace, each slice of the knife and stir of the pot imbued with the weight of what the evening held, a reminder of the stakes of this nascent relationship.

The thought of Edward, so new to his own self-acceptance, brought a mix of hope and hesitation. Lucien saw in Edward not just a potential partner but a kindred spirit, someone who also longed for a deeper connection and genuine recognition. It was a connection that had sparked unexpectedly on the dance floor, an encounter that had promised much more than a fleeting moment of joy. Lucien recognised the fragility of this beginning; the path ahead could be fraught with misunderstandings and missteps due to their past experiences and current fears.

Yet, as he plated the food, arranging it with the care of an artist adding the final touches to a canvas, Lucien felt a quiet resolve. This dinner was not just about the food or the ambiance - it was about laying the groundwork for

something that could withstand the trials of their realities. He knew the journey with Edward would be complex, possibly challenging, but he also felt a surge of something like hope, a belief that they could find not just comfort and care with each other but perhaps even joy. Tonight, he would open his heart a little more, brave the uncertainties, and perhaps, in doing so, they would both find the recognition they sought. It was a risk, but for the first time in a long while, Lucien felt it was worth it.

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On his way to Lucien's for their planned dinner, Edward's phone buzzed insistently. Mitch's name flashed on the screen, the call unexpected and its timing inconvenient.

'Edward, I need you back at the office. There's something about the contract you need to see,' Mitch's voice was tight, edged with urgency.

'Alright, I'm on my way,' he sighed, redirecting his route back to the office.

As Edward entered Mitch's office, a basketball suddenly sailed towards him. 'Catch,' Mitch called out, a grin on his face that didn't quite reach his eyes. The playful gesture

seemed out of place, a forced normalcy in the strained atmosphere.

Edward caught the ball, his reflexes sharp, but his expression was one of bewilderment as he handed it back. 'Mitch, what's going on here?'

Mitch chuckled awkwardly, masking his nervousness. 'Just trying to lighten the mood. Drink?' He passed Edward a glass of scotch.

Edward placed it untouched on the desk, his brows furrowed in concern. 'What's this really about, Mitch?' Edward pressed, sensing an underlying tension.

'Not thirsty, huh?' Mitch laughed again, the sound more a plea than amusement. He stepped closer, his movements betraying a deliberate casualness. Suddenly, his hand reached out, fingers grazing Edward's tie, pulling him in closer. The contact was brief but charged, ending with a light, uninvited kiss on Edward's neck.

Edward tensed, 'Mitch, what are you doing?'

Mitch hesitated, his facade beginning to crack. 'I just thought... that maybe...' He trailed off, the confidence

slipping from his voice as he searched Edward's face for any sign of reciprocation.

'This isn't what I want, Mitch. I'm not interested,' Edward said sharply, stepping back to put distance between them.

'But, Edward, I thought there was something... You've changed, and I thought... '

'No, Mitch. Whatever you're thinking, it's not what I want. We're friends, that's all,' Edward's voice was resolute, his stance firm.

Mitch's face fell, his earlier bravado giving way to a raw, unmasked desperation. 'Don't shut me out, Edward. I've seen how you look at me sometimes, at least let's try and ...'

Edward's reaction was instinctive as Mitch reached for him again. He pushed Mitch with more force than intended. Mitch staggered back, tripping over his own feet and falling against the desk. He lay silent and still.

Horrified, Edward rushed to his side. 'Mitch? Can you hear me?'

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The hospital's sterile hallways offered no comfort as Edward awaited news of Mitch's condition. Learning that he would be kept for overnight for observation did little to ease the weight of worry and guilt that clung to him. As Edward stepped out into the cool night air, his contemplation was interrupted by the sound of hurried footsteps. Sarah approached, her face a picture of concern and fear.

'Edward, what happened? Is Mitch okay?'

'Sarah, Mitch had an accident. He's unconscious right now, but the doctors are looking after him. They're doing everything they can,' he replied, trying to offer comfort though his voice faltered under the weight of his own uncertainties.

Sarah's eyes searched his, desperate for more answers. 'What were you both doing at the office so late? This doesn't make sense.'

Edward looked away, unable to meet her eyes. 'We were sorting out a problem with a contract. It got late, and things... escalated unexpectedly,' he said, his explanation vague, his mind racing to keep the conversation from delving into details he wasn't ready to share.

'But why now, Edward? Why tonight?' Sarah pressed, her voice cracking under the strain, 'Is there something I should know?'

Edward hesitated, 'Sarah, it's complicated.'

Sarah's hand reached out, grasping Edward's arm, her touch pleading. 'Edward, please. Mitch has been different lately - distracted, distant. If something happened between you two, I need to understand. It's been so hard...'

Edward's heart clenched at the plea in her voice, 'Sarah, Mitch and I had a disagreement, that's all. It got out of hand, and I regret how things turned out tonight,' he admitted softly.

'Disagreement?' Sarah echoed, skepticism threading through her exhaustion. 'Please, if there's more ...'

Edward cut her off, gently but firmly, 'I have to go, Sarah. Please take care of him. And... take care of yourself.'

'Let's move that armchair to the far corner by the window, so when your father visits he can sit comfortably and smoke his cigar,' suggested Lucien. Despite his aversion to smoke,

his willingness to accommodate spoke volumes about his commitment to their shared life and the complexities of family dynamics.

‘I’ll put my Dad in the corner anytime!’ Edward quipped with a chuckle, the humour in his voice softening the edges of the truth. ‘He can interrogate us from there with a better view.’

‘Oh, you are being too harsh, Ed! He means well with his inquisitiveness. At least he’s done some reading and even become an ally in his workplace.’

‘I feel grateful,’ Edward beamed, his eyes reflecting a mix of mirth and pride at the genuine care his parents had shown and the warm welcome they had extended to Lucien. The once tentative discussions about Edward’s life had blossomed into dialogues of advocacy.

The decision for Edward and Lucien to move in together marked a milestone in their relationship, a tangible commitment to building a future on their own terms. Edward’s transition to independent work reflected a broader transformation in his life—moving away from the constraints of traditional expectations to embrace a path defined by personal fulfilment and shared adventures. Their plans to explore Continental Europe for the summer underscored

the essence of their life together—not just a physical exploration of new landscapes but an emotional voyage towards understanding and embracing their future together. It was a leap into the unknown, buoyed by the belief in each other and the strength of their bond.

As they stood together in their newly arranged living space, Edward and Lucien shared a moment of quiet contentment. ‘Look at us,’ Edward said, a note of wonder in his voice, ‘arranging furniture together.’

Lucien nodded, squeezing Edward’s hand. ‘Every piece we move, every plan we make, it’s like sketching out a map to a place we’ve never been but always belonged.’

‘This is our victory, isn’t it?’ Edward mused aloud. ‘In our own time, in our own words, finding that love, in its many forms, is the ultimate journey home.’

THE LAST INTERVIEW

Cozel Green sinks deep into the high-backed armchair, stroking his stubbly chin. His left foot rests on his right knee, which bobs up and down rhythmically. His trademark black boots are weathered and scuffed. His jeans are a fashionable shade of unwashed denim blue and he is wearing a faded t-shirt with the logo of a defunct lumber company on the sleeve. Head back, he exhales a stream of smoke and flicks the ash in the direction of the ashtray. The statuesque bodyguard behind him opens the window.

‘There’s no need for that,’ he says, ‘I like the smell.’

The bodyguard shuts the window.

They are in the executive suite of a newly refurbished luxury hotel which has spared no cost on attention to detail. Cozel Green arrived an hour ago and has managed to burn a hole in the velvet sofa and leave a trail of ash on the white, ankle deep plush carpet. He has spilled coffee on the linen covered dining chairs and there is mud on the bed covers

from his boots. He arrived with three body guards, two are stationed by the front door.

The hotel is running a publicity campaign by inviting well-known musicians to be interviewed in its most exclusive and extravagant rooms. Of course Cozel was invited given his award winning albums, millions of active supporters on social media and an ever expanding group of vocal fans who follow him adoringly around the world on tour.

According to a recent article in a music magazine he also has a record number of stalkers one of whom was jailed just a month ago having broken into his city apartment and held him at knifepoint until he sang their favourite song. Cozel himself disarmed the person and wrestled him to the floor.

Cozel has a propensity to come across as if nothing fazes him, that he can take on the world and survive against the odds and do so with little effort. He isn't one to throw a tantrum when the stage lights don't work, or make a fuss when the sound system is on the fritz. He doesn't care what the design of his publicity material looks like and he has no interest in extracurricular pursuits that feed into the celebrity and fame machine. People have also noticed that he takes a lackadaisical approach to his music and yet, according to industry pundits, has written some of the most significant pieces of cross over fusion music in recent years.

His sales are consistently high and he dedicates his time to touring as often as possible.

Journalists competed to do the interview with Cozel. Most saw it as having the potential to be career defining. Others just wanted to be in the same room as him. In the end it was a Ellis Raine, a journalist at the start of his career who was selected. The panel felt that he hadn't been around long enough to write anything contentious and there was less of a chance of Cozel having any issues with him. If they had thought to ask, they would have found that Cozel wasn't especially bothered who interviewed him. He had agreed to participate in the publicity event because he liked the idea of being able to do what he wanted in a pristine room of an overpriced establishment, although that wasn't quite the terms of the agreement with hotel management.

Ellis was running late. He had overslept and had forgotten about the interview. He had spent the night before in a club listening to an unsigned band and then went home with a groupie who didn't get very far attracting the attention of the lead singer and settled for Ellis.

Still, Ellis wanted to get through the interview, he had heard that there were hundreds of applicants. He wasn't entirely clear why he had been selected but he knew that the

interview could propel him to the next stage of his career. He hadn't made much impact so far, spending most of his time writing about those on the margins and those overlooked for their creativity; this would be his first opportunity to speak to someone who had made it and was considered a significant force in the industry.

When Ellis arrived, Cozel was lounging on the sofa. He didn't rise or shake Ellis' extended hand. He lowered his sunglasses and eyed Ellis critically, 'First, you are late. Second, you smell like a distillery - if I lit a match we'd go up in flames. Third, I like your style. Fourth, don't push it.'

Ellis' hands trembled slightly as he adjusted his phone's recorder, ensuring it was angled perfectly on the plush, albeit slightly ash-stained, coffee table. As he surveyed the room, his eyes fell on the disarray left by Cozel. It was as if Cozel sought to stamp his disdain on every surface of the opulent environment.

'Do you want to do pleasantries, or shall we dive into it?' asked Cozel, sitting up.

'Can we open a window? Please?'

Cozel nodded at the bodyguard. 'Anything else?'

'It's an honour to meet you,' Ellis managed, the words feeling inadequate.

'That's good to know, Ellis,' Cozel replied, his tone flat, his gaze drifting lazily back to the window.

Ellis flipped open his notebook and realised he had brought the wrong one. He was parched and disoriented, but decided that this could help rather than hinder him, perhaps spur him to ask questions others wouldn't. He continued to flip through the pages as if there was something to find.

Cozel was eyeing Ellis closely. He wondered how much fun he could have with the fledgling journalist.

'A lot of questions?' Cozel asked, reclining and placing his boots on the table.

'No, not at all. We could have a conversation if you prefer?'

'Go ahead and ask away.'

'Your songs have always had a political edge, but on your latest album the lyrics veer significantly into the realms of the surreal, which makes their meaning hard to discern.'

'I like my realism with a sprinkle of magic,' said Cozel.

'Yeah, I confuse fiction with reality often.'

'Really? How so?'

'Like when I imagine I'm going to be able to write an amazing piece of music and get it played by someone I admire and the reality is that the piece is derivative and no one wants to hear it.'

'Ah - you are a composer Ellis?'

'No, well, I dabble. But back to you, your latest album, what inspired you to take such a shift in your lyrics?'

'Boredom in part, also I thought it would be good to shake things up a bit so the listener does some work to try and understand the message.'

'Yes, but what is the message?'

'Anything you want it to be Ellis!' said Cozel, rising to his feet, 'People perceive things in their own image, their own ideology goes over anything I have to say. Music, art, is about interpretation. I don't spoon feed people.'

'But you did before - you specifically spoke about change, empathy and support for the underdog, some of your lyrics read like an instruction manual on what to do - save the environment, support social cohesion, build communities ...'

Cozel held his hands up 'Guilty, sir, guilty as charged,' he laughed. 'How do you think the interview is going Ellis? Are you getting what you came for?' Cozel, reached for Ellis' phone and switched the voice recorder off. 'Listen and absorb what I say - you don't need it on tape.'

'You may challenge what I write and ...'

'I could do that anyway - grow up.'

'Can I get some water? Perhaps we could pause for a few minutes?' asked Ellis, wanting a moment to think about his approach.

'Sure, there's time, let me know when you want me,' said Cozel, his movements light and agile as he jumped up on the bed and then lay down on it, stretching out comfortably. His head dangled casually over the edge, a playful yet precarious position.

There was a knock on the door.

'Ah, perfect timing,' said Cozel.

A gaunt looking man wheeled in a brunch trolley.

'You look like you need a holiday or a better job,' Cozel remarked, his tone carrying a mix of jest and genuine concern as he eyed the weary server. The bodyguard handed the man a sizeable tip, and the server saluted at Cozel, who was still lying with his head hanging off the edge, upside down, observing the world from his unusual perspective. He gave the man a thumbs up, his smile almost a challenge to the ordinary.

'Help yourself, Ellis,' said Cozel, gesturing towards the spread with a casual flick of his hand.

Ellis poured himself a coffee and stepped out onto the balcony. It overlooked the private gardens of the hotel, lush and vibrant beneath a sky that was a piercing, unblemished blue, clear and bright. The morning sun cast a sharp contrast of light and shadow across the sculpted hedges and flowering beds, creating a painting-like vista that momentarily took his breath away. He sent a text to a friend and waited for a response, downing his coffee as he took in the serene view.

Heading back in, Ellis grabbed some sandwiches and saw the message from his friend pop up on his phone, causing him to almost choke on his food.

'Ready?' asked Cozel, standing behind Ellis, 'Your notebook looks pretty empty from where I am standing.'

'The questions are at the back,' lied Ellis, feeling uneasy.

Cozel patted him on the head lightly then returned to his position opposite him, pouring himself a coffee and topping up Ellis' cup.

'I'd like to ask what you think of your music having broad appeal - your fan base is across age groups,' said Ellis.

'Do you mean to ask why it has broad appeal?'

Ellis nodded, 'Yes, younger generations are drawn to your music and those who discovered your work way back when you first began are still fans.'

'I'm not that old Ellis, but perhaps people find an affinity in my work because of the topics I cover.'

Ellis made some notes and sat back as if in deep thought. 'I think it is more than just your music, your fans are very

protective of you too. There is also the regular stories about you being a nice guy, someone who is approachable and who cares.'

Cozel stared at Ellis for a while. Then he stood and stretched. 'Incredible to absorb the vibes of this city. It has a rhythm to it that I haven't found anywhere else, I wrote the songs for my new album here and it brought back memories, some of which I wove into the work.'

'What memories?'

'This was the first city I performed at, and where I was signed by a record company for example.'

'I heard that happened quickly, you didn't have to struggle,' said Ellis.

'True. I got lucky I guess,' Cozel shrugged.

'Why did you decide to become a music journalist Ellis?'

'I wanted to spend my time going to gigs and listening to music,' said Ellis.

'To get laid you mean,' said Cozel.

'No! I really love music,' said Ellis defensively.

'Would you do anything for music?'

'Wait, what does that mean?' said Ellis before quickly adding, 'But this is about you and ...'

'The conversational style appeals to me for part deux of the interview. Indulge me,' said Cozel.

'Thing is, from what I have read about you, you've supported other artists and guided up-and-coming singer-songwriters. Are you trying to ensure your legacy is going to be good guy makes great music and everyone is happy?' Ellis leaned forward, the question hanging in the air like a challenge.

Cozel looked at him for a long moment, his gaze steady. 'There is a difference between the public and private persona. You're a journalist, you should know that.' He paused, his voice dropping to a softer, more contemplative tone. 'They didn't send you here to get salacious gossip or the dirt on me. Look at where we are.' He gestured broadly to the opulent surroundings. 'Open your big brown eyes. This is the plushiest hotel in the city. Who do you think will get a chance to stay here? My fans? No. Your readers? I don't think so, Ellis.'

Ellis watched as Cozel stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his boot, a deliberate action that seemed to punctuate his point. Cozel took out his phone and scrolled through messages before sending one, his fingers moving with deliberate slowness.

Ellis shifted uncomfortably. 'You want me to take the easy route and ask you glib questions that would look as informative on a music blog as it would in a good housekeeping magazine? Is that it?' His voice was unsure, probing, needing to push boundaries but fearing the consequences.

Cozel put his phone down and locked eyes with Ellis. 'Here's what I think, Ellis. You want your life to feel dangerous, but not too much, just enough to make you feel alive.' He leaned back, his expression unreadable. 'Well, guess what? I'm not here to give that to you. I can't even if I wanted to,' he said.

Ellis felt a ping on his phone and glanced down briefly before looking back up at Cozel. 'Walk away, Ellis,' Cozel said softly, pouring himself a coffee.

Ignoring the warning, Ellis pressed on. 'I heard about something that happened when you first started touring. Two people disappeared, one of them was your publicist

and the other was a set director. There was an investigation at the time. Can you talk about that?’

‘Sure. I’ll say what I have always said. It was a loss. No one knows what happened.’

Ellis paused, choosing his next words carefully. ‘But isn’t it true that the publicity from that incident helped sell a lot of records?’

‘Yes. I guess it seems that way. But the records still sell, so it must have been more than the disappearances.’

The bodyguard stepped forward, his presence imposing. ‘I think we are done here,’ he stated, his voice firm.

‘There’s still thirty minutes,’ Ellis countered quickly.

Cozel gave the bodyguard a subtle wave, a silent command to back off. The bodyguard retreated but remained alert, his eyes never leaving Ellis.

‘You seem very detached from the conventional celebrity pursuits,’ Ellis noted, shifting gears in an attempt to probe deeper.

Cozel laughed, a sound that was hollow, devoid of any true amusement. 'Detached? Or maybe just disillusioned, Ellis. The music business—it's a beast that needs to be fed. And trust me, it eats its young.'

'What do you mean by that?' Ellis asked, his voice steady.

'It's a game, Ellis. A deadly serious game,' Cozel's demeanour shifted, his body tensing as he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing slightly. 'You think it's all about music and art? It's about survival. It's about doing whatever—or whoever—it takes to stay on top. It's an industry Ellis - it's no different from other sectors of an economy.'

'Have you ever had to... do things you regret to stay on top?' Ellis pressed, his voice low.

'You might think you're just writing an article, Ellis. But you're playing the game now, too. Be careful how you play it,' Cozel's voice was a warning, tinged with a threat that was as subtle as it was clear.

Ellis hesitated, then plunged ahead, driven by a mix of professional urgency and personal curiosity. 'The disappearances linked to your early tours, those weren't the only ones. There were more, as recently as a year ago.'

Cozel stood abruptly, his movement swift and startling, 'Sometimes, Ellis, things happen. People disappear. The show goes on.'

'But are your lyrics and your music really what you believe in?'

'Well I believe in my work when I do it, but if I were to look back on my earlier work, I would like to think I have evolved somewhat and widened my thinking, perhaps thought of new ways of entertaining people with music.'

'I .. I've heard a rumour that you don't actually write your music and that this is a closely guarded secret in the industry... well, the disappearances could be linked to people finding out and paying a price for it,' Ellis' words tumbled out, more accusation than question, the caffeine clearly stripping away his usual caution.

'What is your actual question, Ellis?'

'Is it true that you stole the songs when you first started out and continue to do so and that if anyone finds out you get rid of them?' Ellis' voice was a mix of defiance and apprehension.

'If that were true, you surely wouldn't expect to leave this interview alive, would you?' Cozel replied a smile playing on his lips that didn't reach his eyes. 'Now, do you think you have enough for your article?' Cozel asked, stretching his arms and yawning.

'I just have ...'

'The bodyguard moved closer, his presence a clear signal: the interview was over. As Ellis gathered his belongings, his mind raced. He wasn't entirely sure what he had uncovered or whether he had understood the implications of the conversation. Cozel stood with his hands deep in his pockets, nodding a goodbye to Ellis before disappearing onto the balcony.

'Do you think he'll write it up? Or do you think he needs another nudge?' asked the bodyguard.

'Not sure' said Cozel.

Ellis had barely made it to the elevator when the bodyguards asked him to follow them back to the room. 'You can't keep me here,' said Ellis, his voice rising with fear.

'Oh, please don't be dramatic. You were doing so well before,' said Cozel, 'I've had an idea Ellis and wanted to talk to you about it. Have a seat.'

Ellis glanced towards the door where the two bodyguards stood and to his side was the third. He sat down.

'Ellis,' Cozel began, 'You're sharp. You listen and it's rare to find someone who speaks their mind.'

Ellis, managed a cautious nod. 'Thank you, I guess.'

'How would you like to make use of that mind of yours? Become part of something that could really challenge you, and push you to be who you truly want to be.'

Ellis frowned slightly. 'What are you suggesting?'

'I'm offering you a job. There is a vacancy - personal assistant. You will travel and work closely with me. You've got the guts and the guile. Our little chat today proved that much,' Cozel said.

Ellis' heart skipped a beat. This was a life-changing offer, a chance to leap from the sidelines into the very heart of what he loved.

'And what about...everything we talked about today? The allegations, the disappearances?' Ellis's voice was a whisper.

Cozel's smile was reassuring yet unreadable. 'In this job, you'll learn quickly that what we allow the world to see is just as important as what we don't. You get to help write the story, Ellis. Not just report on it ... I'm not going to prevent you from publishing what you want about our discussion today. Go ahead. The rumour mill in our industry works overtime. But, if you want to work for me ... that could be a problem ... No rush, just think about it.'

The weight of Cozel's words resonated deeply with Ellis. The allure of being part of the narrative was overwhelming.

Finally, he nodded, his earlier reservations melting away, 'Okay, I'll do it.'

'Smart choice,' Cozel said, 'Welcome to the team.'

As Ellis' left the hotel, his doubts were silenced by the proximity to fame and power, his decision sealing a pact that might one day demand its own price.

BREAKING POINT

'Another day in paradise,' said Dr. Farid Ali. The overhead fluorescent lights blinked on, illuminating the stark white walls and sending a harsh glare through the office. Farid, already prepared, felt grateful for the dark glasses shielding his eyes. There was a knock on the door and Luke Evans the practice manager entered, shutting the door slowly and carefully before letting go with a burst of anxious energy.

'It's a mess out there! The waiting room is packed,' Luke said handing Farid a coffee and a buttered scone.

'Thank you. Any word on the locum doctors? At least for the winter? Oh, and just so you know, Dr. Khan called this morning. She has decided not to take us up on our offer - she thinks this place will be too overwhelming for her,' said Farid, brows raised. Luke shook his head and mouthed 'Oh my God'. The last two doctors at the practice had left six months ago and Farid had been managing on his own. He patted Luke on the shoulder trying to reassure him before sitting down to get ready for his first patient. 'See you later Luke,' he called out. Luke left, disappointed that it would be another hectic day at the surgery and as practice manager that meant he would be staying late with Farid.

James Kendrick was a regular patient at the surgery. Farid listened to him expound upon the therapeutic virtues of cat purrs against the gnawing ache of arthritis.

'I simply place my palms around Bertie's belly, thrice daily,' James elucidated, his eyes twinkling. 'The vibrations, they sort of... well, resonate, easing the stiffness, the pain. Might just be the cure, don't you think?'

Farid offered a nod. He hadn't expected James to bring his cat along to demonstrate, but there Bertie sat on the chair glaring at Farid without blinking. Bertie was a black cat with patchy fur, a sinewy body and a sullen manner that belied his therapeutic virtues.

'You can put Bertie back in his carrier now James and thank you for the demonstration.'

Listening to James, while a welcome divergence from the relentless tide of respiratory ailments and mental health crises that peaked with the season, was something he could ill afford to spend time on. Farid paused to remind himself that it was these moments of genuine connection, of listening to the idiosyncrasies of human belief, that enabled

him to weather the chaos of his practice, although he would have preferred Bertie to remain at home.

Farid's was the last practice in the neighbourhood - deprivation, escalating social violence and funding cuts having sent other general practitioners running for less stressful pastures. Some had abandoned the profession entirely, disillusioned and burnt out. Farid remained a wellspring of energy although he noticed he had become less able to curb his cynicism of late. Regardless, he remained steadfast in his desire to cultivate an empathetic service although even he had to admit that everyday was a marathon with no finish line in sight and his dedication was teetering on the precipice of martyrdom. He wondered if working in healthcare was the sword upon which he had chosen to fall.

Alan Carter, Farid's husband, watched this endeavour with a blend of admiration, pride and concern. A former physics teacher turned career coach, Alan's own difficult journey through career transition had left him with a deep respect for the value of well-being over a sense of unwavering duty. His queries into Farid's relentless work ethic were as frequent as they were laden with worry, he sent messages to his husband at regular intervals during the day providing a listening ear and supporting him as best he could, but he

also asked Farid to reconsider his limits so that his work-life balance improved to benefit him and their relationship, which was often put under strain by the necessities of Farid's work.

Farid was loath to engage in introspection and remained undeterred, continuing to push himself against his own exhaustion. He was too emotionally invested to consider what it meant to abandon his practice. He had mastered the art of perseverance, of navigating through life's tempests with a stoic resolve. The prospect of unraveling, of confronting the fragility of his convictions, was a risk too perilous to entertain.

'So, what do you think, doctor?' James Kendrick asked.

Farid met James's expectant gaze with a measured smile. 'While the medicinal benefits of cat purrs have yet to grace the pages of medical journals James, your experience speaks volumes. If you find solace and relief in Bertie's company, then I see no harm in continuing. However,' he added, the printer whirring to life beside him, 'let's also ensure you're following the prescribed medication and exercise regimen. Balance, as in all things, is key.'

James nodded. He never fusses, thought Farid. James had been a patient of the surgery for a long while. Farid visited

him at home during Christmas the year before when he had a nasty tumble trying to attach a large gold star on the top of his overly tall tree and he was heartened to see that he lived in relative comfort in a two bedroom flat in one of the high rise buildings at the edge of the city centre. He also had friendly neighbours who checked on him, and of course there was Bertie.

Farid had spent time talking to James that day who shared that he worked from home answering calls from customers of utility companies. He used to be an accountant at a large firm in the city, but was stalled in his attempts to get a promotion and so walked away from it all and moved to the neighbourhood to preserve his savings and to focus on more creative pursuits. He had shared some of his sculptural pieces with Farid - they were made of clay and paper mache and were of the assortment of people that he had met throughout his life and those who lived in the neighbourhood. But even with the varied activities in his life, he seemed to be less than content and his seeming loneliness had kept Farid there for longer than he intended.

James accepted the prescription note and shrugged on his woollen coat. 'I told Bertie yesterday morning he can't go out. He mewed and scratched at the door. But I was firm, I told him, listen B if I let you out in the storm, your puny

body will be blown all over the country.’ He laughed, it deepened into a belly laugh and he began coughing unable to stop his laugh-coughing fit.

‘Yes, the storm,’ Farid nodded, rolling down his sleeves and suddenly impatient for James to leave. He knew there was a busy waiting room and he could hear the irritable cries of children through the walls. Those in the waiting room coughing and sneezing on each other was not the best thing thought Farid, now anxious to continue the day.

‘The storm at our end left no noticeable damage, but you should see the area near the main ring road, doctor, some trees were uprooted and there was debris strewn across the streets including construction material.’

‘Yes,’ Farid said distractedly, noticing that James had sat down again. He looked flushed. ‘Are you alright James?’

‘I’m worried that I may fall really sick and no one will care for Bertie. My solicitor is sending you a certificate to sign to say I am of sound mind as I am drafting my will and power of attorney.’

Farid nodded and smiled sympathetically. ‘It’s good to make the necessary arrangements. Well done for getting your

affairs in order, and of course I will sign the paperwork when it arrives.' Farid rose and ushered his patient out.

—

'He's leaving everything to his cat, isn't he?' said Alan, during their regular afternoon call. After James Kendrick, Farid managed to get through just two more patients and decided to sneak out for a cigarette break.

'Are you smoking, Farid?'

Farid exhaled loudly and took another deep drag.

'Because if you are, you can forget about coming home!'

'It's just a single cigarette I cadged off my last patient. I had to confiscate her cigarette as she has a bad chest.'

'Je - sus, you can't go on like this Farid. Stub that fucker out!'

Farid knew Alan was right of course. He quit smoking last year, but still had the occasional cigarette. He also lied to Alan - he had confiscated a whole pack of cigarettes, not a solitary one. He could still hear Alan cursing. Farid missed him even though they had a long breakfast together after their morning run. Farid found Alan reassuring, tender,

interesting and gorgeous. A combination he never thought he'd find - ever. How they met was rather uneventful, it was at an end of year party at the hospital and Alan arrived on the arm of his then partner. Farid managed to squeeze in between them during the night and started talking to him. His partner left at midnight and Alan stayed behind. They'd been together since that night and their fifth year anniversary was coming up - Alan's parents were happy he married a doctor and Farid's parents were happy he married someone who enjoyed spending time with them too, it was a bonus for them that he was well spoken and tall. When they moved to the city they found a flat that suited both of them in terms of distances from their respective workplaces. All in all they considered themselves lucky to have met and to have made a life together.

Farid stubbed out the cigarette on the heel of his boot promising Alan he would get some gum and never smoke again. He entered the building and nodded to the two receptionists who were fielding calls and fending off irritated patients standing in a queue that circled out the front door.

The rest of Farid's day lasted until 8pm when he saw a patient who voiced concern that there were no white doctors at the practice. He politely told her there were no

straight doctors at the practice either. She was visibly startled by his wide grin and took her prescription. On her way out she grumbled to the lone receptionist about the service and filled out a feedback form. Farid sighed and opened the top drawer of his desk. He stared longingly at the pack of cigarettes before shutting the drawer with a bang. He knew Alan wouldn't forgive him and would be able to smell it on his breath and clothes, there was no time to sort that out before getting home.

Exhausted, he felt the need to channel his simmering irritability into something productive rather than risk taking it out on Alan. The gym, usually a sanctuary from the relentless pace of his professional life, was unusually crowded. As he manoeuvred past occupied treadmills, Farid's mind replayed the day's confrontations and the unopened pack of cigarettes that lay in the top drawer of his desk. Settling for the stair master, he lost himself in the rhythm of ascent, each step registering as a metaphorical effort to rise above the day's challenges.

It was the weights that beckoned him next, offering the tangible challenge he craved. With each lift, Farid sought release, a purging of the day's frustrations through sheer physical exertion. The gym's cacophony of clanking weights and the rhythmic hum of machines lulled him into a

semblance of peace as his mind switched away from work to meditating on the surrounding sounds.

Farid collapsed on a bench, his breath shallow and ragged, His gaze drifted, taking in the familiar faces of resolve around him, each person locked in their own battle. It was here, in this moment of vulnerability, that Derek approached, his presence a sudden intrusion.

'Hi, I'm Derek, are you new here?'

Farid looked in the direction of the voice. A middle-aged man was standing just to the right of the bench and staring straight ahead.

'Are you talking to me Derek?' Farid asked, bemused at the lack of eye contact.

'Yeah, yes, sorry ... was just looking to see if the other machine was free. You can never get on the treadmills this time of day, have you noticed?' Derek sat down next to Farid and held out his hand, which he shook.

'I'm Farid, nice to meet you. Yeah, good luck finding a free a treadmill.'

The owner of the gym walked by giving them a nod. 'I'm on it gentlemen. We are ordering new machines.'

'You said that last year Frank,' laughed Farid.

He smiled, put a finger to his lips indicating for Farid to hush before lumbering off - a gym owner who didn't work out. He also smokes, thought Farid longingly.

Derek and Farid exchanged looks and smiled awkwardly.

'Yes, well ...,' said Derek, hastily scribbling his number on a card and handing it to Farid.

'Are you a doctor Derek? Because only then will I be calling this number,' smiled Farid.

'What's the matter, you injure yourself?'

'No, it's nothing,' Farid smiled, getting his things together to leave.

Derek touched his elbow and motioned for him to sit back down again. Raising his left hand, adorned with his wedding band, Farid offered Derek a crooked smile before leaving.

Alan hovered as Farid put the finishing touches on a salad. He gave him a hug wrapping his arms around him tightly. 'Can't smell smoke on you. That's a good thing,' he smiled. 'And what's this?' he asked seeing the card with Derek's number on it.

'Oh, a guy at the gym gave it to me,' said Farid moving to the dining table, pouring them both some water.

'Should I be worried?'

'Nah, he has much less hair than you do,' laughed Farid.

Alan threw a bread roll at him. 'Wait, I recognise this number. Hang on,' he said, looking at his phone.

'You look adorable,' said Farid, lost in other thoughts.

'No, wait. This number ...'

'How well do you know that number, Alan?' Farid teased.

'It's for the gallery cafe that shut down last year because of the bodies that were discovered in the basement. Remember?' Alan said.

Farid did remember. It was quite a news story at the time as the gallery was considered a well-loved fixture in the city doubling as a venue in the evening for music and poetry events. They also served a good chocolate cake, remembered Farid. He and Alan had ordered their wedding cake from their supplier. The gallery was situated on the promenade overlooking the sea and was often busy during the summer. 'They found two bodies didn't they? And they couldn't identify them?'

Alan nodded. 'Yes, a local reporter had got drunk and taken a wrong turn and landed up in the basement where the bodies were poorly concealed under a tarp.'

'How come you recognised the number?'

'Before we met I worked there for a while. I helped with promotions and arranged the art displays, that kind of thing ... but let's get back to the main issue, Derek giving you the number of the gallery - the place is shut.'

Farid shrugged 'Who knows, in a rush he may have made a mistake with one of the digits.'

Later that evening Alan and Farid were lying in bed. Alan was reading a book for work and Farid was doing some pencil sketches of him in his journal, something he found

restful at the end of the day. Farid kissed Alan's neck to get his attention. He put down his book and stroked Farid's hair.

'I'm worried about you Farid,' he said kissing him. Alan was not wrong to worry about his husband. Farid had withstood a lot of chaos and disappointment in his life and his journey to becoming a doctor had been complex and tiring. Alan knew this and wanted very much to help him find something that was less stressful and more forgiving. He knew how hard Farid was on himself when something happened to one of his patients and when he couldn't see everyone he needed to.

'Luke is trying to hire a couple of locum doctors.'

Alan would have preferred if someone took over Farid's practice. He felt it was time for him to work in an affluent and therefore healthier part of the city. It would mean they could both move out of the neighbourhood too, somewhere more secure and quieter. He also knew that he could put pressure on Farid if he corralled his parents into it. Farid's parents would have preferred for him to work elsewhere. They had said so numerous times.

'If you located elsewhere you could work on your hobbies, do other things, maybe get back into your research?' Alan kissed Farid on the lips and stroked his thigh. Farid wrapped

his arms around Alan and kissed him deeply, pulling him closer. Alan was unsure whether this was a tactic to delay the conversation but didn't care, giving himself over to the bliss of his husband. It was many hours before they fell into a deep and restful sleep, arms and legs tangled together, a mutual sense of safety and warmth enveloping them.

—

Two days later, an irate patient, inflamed by an inability to get his usual medication due to shortages, lashed out. He stomped on a nurse's toe and shoved him against the frosted glass front door of the practice. Luke, quick to react, managed to pull the man away just in time, but the implications of the confrontation reverberated far beyond the immediate physical injuries, disturbing the fragile peace of the practice.

Aware of the toll these incidents were taking, Farid decided it was time for a change. He was deeply concerned for his staff and himself, and he no longer wanted Alan to fret about his safety. With a heavy heart, he acknowledged that staying under these conditions would require not only financial investment in security measures but could also lead to complete burnout by year's end. Sacrificing his career on the altar of his commitment seemed too great a

risk. Decisively, within a week, he had brought in two temporary doctors to share the load, and Farid cut back his own hours.

—

That afternoon, Farid joined Alan in embracing a rare sunny day despite the lingering chill. They decided to venture out to consider new places to live. At a quaint seafront café, shielded slightly from a brisk sea breeze, they sat soaking up the sunshine. Alan, excited, browsed through an apartment complex's website on his phone. 'They have an onsite gym too, and a pool,' he remarked enthusiastically, tilting the screen towards Farid. The sunlight danced on Alan's blonde hair, igniting golden highlights that captivated Farid. It was these small moments that reminded him of the beauty in life outside his stressful career. Feeling the weight of his decisions lifting slightly, Farid allowed himself to focus more on Alan.

'You listening?' Alan asked, a playful nudge under the table bringing Farid back from his reverie.

Farid smiled. 'I'm good with the apartment. It's also within walking distance of the new practice. Let's give it a go, and if we don't like it, we can always move. I'm done with

hanging on because I'm too scared to think about change... Plus, it means more time for us, together.'

Alan's smile broadened, and he tapped the number for the estate agents into his phone, feeling a profound sense of relief and anticipation. 'This is going to be great, Farid. A new start.'

—

Later that evening, the quiet of the closing practice was stark against the day's earlier vibrancy. Farid was alone, finalising details for his transition. The offices felt unusually still as he made his rounds, checking lights and alarms. A shadow flickered at the edge of his vision as he approached the exit, prompting him to pause. With a cautious hand, he texted Alan: "Heading home now. Love you." Peering cautiously out the door, he scanned the area before stepping into the icy drizzle. The chill prompted him to pull his coat tighter as he hurried home.

The echo of footsteps behind him hastened his pace. Turning, he saw nothing, yet the sense of being followed persisted. Just as he neared his flat, a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He spun around, fists raised in a defensive posture.

'Hey, there's no need for that,' Derek said, stepping back with his hands raised in a placating gesture. 'I thought I recognised you. Do you remember me?'

Farid's stance softened, though his voice retained an edge. 'Not good coming up behind someone like that in this neighbourhood, or ever,' he said, his heart still racing.

'Yeah, I... I wasn't thinking. Listen, you didn't call? I wanted to talk to you. It's important...,' Derek began, his expression earnest.

'I'm sorry, Derek, I'm not interested,' Farid began, but his words were drowned out by the screeching of tires. Two vans skidded to a halt across the street, men brandishing sticks poured out and charged at a group emerging from the betting shop, their shouts filling the air. Quickly, Farid pulled out his phone to call the police as the first punches were thrown. He turned to warn Derek to leave, but he had already disappeared into the night.

'Farid, Farid! Get over here!' Alan's voice carried over the tumult, urgent and worried.

'I'm coming!' Farid yelled back, sprinting across the road just as the melee escalated. Safe inside their flat, they watched as sirens wailed and police cordoned off the street,

the outside world a stark contrast to their hopeful plans for a new beginning.

—

By spring, Farid and Alan had settled into their new apartment. It was a bit smaller than their previous home, but its charm, especially the view overlooking the pool, quickly won them over. Adapting to their new surroundings didn't take long. Farid was still tethered to his old practice as they hadn't yet found a permanent replacement, but his reduced hours gave him a semblance of relief. He was counting down the weeks until he could start at the new job, conveniently located within walking distance from their home.

However, not everything was smooth sailing. James Kendrick, one of Farid's long-time patients, had taken the news of Farid's departure particularly hard. Upon learning of the impending change, James had experienced what he described as a 'nasty turn', claiming to feel unwell for the rest of the week and pointedly blaming Farid for his ailment. Despite suffering from only mild arthritis and being in generally good health at sixty, James had no family but had built strong connections with his neighbours.

Farid attempted to alleviate his concerns during one of their appointments. 'James, I assure you, the locum doctors are highly competent, permanent doctors are due to join and the staff here will continue to support you,' Farid said, his tone both soothing and firm.

But James seemed unconvinced, his visits becoming more frequent, almost as if he were seeking errors to validate his unrest. During these consultations, Farid felt his options dwindling. 'Have you considered joining the patient group here at the practice?' he suggested during one visit. 'It could be a good opportunity for you to influence how we move forward and to connect more other patients.'

This suggestion, however, did not sit well with James. On their last appointment, his frustration boiled over. 'You've never really cared about us, have you?' James accused, his voice rising sharply. 'It's like we're just numbers to you!'

Farid, taken aback, tried to respond, but James didn't wait to hear it. He stormed out, his anger leaving a trail of chaos in the form of toppled chairs and torn down posters from the message boards.

Shaken by the encounter, Farid confided in Luke. 'He's clearly upset, but I believe he'll adjust to the new arrangements in time.'

Luke was less optimistic. 'I don't like it,' he said, frowning. 'James's reaction today was over the top. It's not just about being upset. He's taking it personally, and that could escalate.'

Back at the apartment, Farid recounted the incident to Alan over dinner. 'I've always tried to do my best for my patients. But maybe I underestimated how deeply some of them rely on that continuity,' he admitted, pushing around the food on his plate.

Alan reached across the table, squeezing Farid's hand. 'You can't carry the weight of everyone's well-being, Farid. You've done more than enough, and it's time for you to take a step back and think about our future too.'

Farid nodded, the reassurance from Alan helping to ease some of his guilt and tension. 'You're right,' he sighed. 'It's just hard to see someone you've cared for in such distress.'

As they continued their meal, the conversation shifted to plans for exploring more of their new neighbourhood, a reminder that despite the challenges, a fresh start awaited them.

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‘I’m sorry to see you go, but it’s probably for the best. You really need to move on... I’m thinking of doing the same,’ Luke said with a reflective sigh. It was Farid's last day, and they were gathered at a popular local bar along the bustling seafront, a modest farewell with the nurses and support staff. The air was tinged with a mix of celebration and nostalgia. Farid, feeling a sense of duty mixed with camaraderie, agreed to stay on for a few rounds. The evening breeze was lively, carrying the salty scent of the sea as they meandered from one bar to the next. It was unusually busy for a Friday night, but the group hadn’t celebrated together in a while, and despite his fatigue, Farid wanted to savour these final moments.

As they moved towards the next venue, the thumping bass of music grew louder, and a vibrant throng of dance club revellers approached energetically from behind. The group found themselves pressed back against the cool, shuttered facades of shops to let the lively crowd pass.

‘Hey,’ Luke nudged Farid playfully, gesturing to a familiar spot. They were outside the old gallery cafe. With a theatrical shiver, Luke added, ‘Creepy, right? Remember this place?’ He went on to recount tales of the grisly murders that had occurred there, a story he had followed with grim fascination. The group, wrapped a bit tighter in their coats

against the unexpected chill, shifted uneasily, eager to find warmth inside the next bar. Yet, the infectious energy of the disco dancers swept them along, their steps quickening to the beat as they moved towards the neon lights of the bars further down.

Lost in thought, Farid glanced back at the shuttered gallery. For a moment, he thought he saw a shadow flicker behind the dusty windows but dismissed it as a trick of the light. 'It's time to go,' he announced, scanning the group to see who remained. His eyes lingered on a 'Purchase and Renovation' sign beside the gallery. It seemed the place was destined for transformation.

Luke caught Farid's gaze chuckled, 'Well, who would want to have cake here again? Also, now that the journalist is dead, this place is just bad news!'

'What?!?' Farid turned sharply.

With his hands buried deep in his pockets, Luke elaborated, 'The journalist who discovered the two bodies in the basement? He was found strangled the night of that big storm several months back. Another unsolved case to add to the list... Shall we try and catch up with the others ahead?'

Distracted by the mention of the storm, Farid's thoughts turned to a past conversation with James about letting Bertie out during bad weather. The memory of their last, heated exchange soured his mood. He glanced at his phone; Alan had sent a message asking for an update. After quickly texting back, Farid looked up, 'Hey Luke?' But Luke was nowhere to be seen. Pivoting on his heels, Farid called out, 'Luke? Luke, you there?'

Deciding to try a call, Farid raised his phone, but just then, a sudden thump on his back and a firm grip around his neck startled him. He struggled as he was pulled backwards, the contents of his pockets scattering. He reached back, trying desperately to grasp his assailant. His attempts to cry out were stifled by the tightening grip on his neck.

'Hurry up, will you! Just get him in here,' a raspy voice commanded from the shadows. Farid's resistance weakened as a sharp pain exploded in his head followed by a loud bang, enveloping him in darkness.

It was almost midnight when Alan noticed Farid's message. Deciding it was the only way to ensure Farid would come home if the others wanted to continue bar crawling into the night, he slipped on his sneakers and dashed out of the flat. The crisp night air was invigorating as he jogged through

the quiet streets, feeling a mix of relief and anticipation at Farid's impending shift to a nearby practice.

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In the dank, mildew-scented basement, Farid's eyes struggled to adjust to the oppressive darkness. A vice-like grip on his arm steered him roughly down a narrow staircase. His heart pounded in his chest as he tried to regulate his breathing. Suddenly, he was pushed to the floor; his wrists were swiftly tied, followed by his ankles, leaving him lying helplessly on his side.

'Move them to the left—no, to the right. Oh, who cares, just shine the light over there,' a gruff voice commanded. A flickering light briefly illuminated the space, revealing Luke lying groaning beside him, eyes shut in pain. Pushing himself up, Farid focused on the bizarre scene in front of him—a table with clay figures arranged in a chilling semi-circle.

'What is this?' Farid's voice cracked, the dryness of his throat making each word a struggle. A figure stepped into the dim light. 'Derek?! What the hell are you doing?' Farid exclaimed, confusion and fear mingling in his voice.

'How do you know my son?' a familiar voice boomed from the shadows. Farid's stomach churned as James emerged, his features twisted in a sinister grin.

'Yes, Farid, it's me,' James declared, his tone flat. 'You didn't think I'd let you get away that easily, did you?'

You kidnapped me because you want me to remain your doctor?' Farid's voice trembled with disbelief. 'You have a son? What the hell is going on? Untie me—I need to tend to Luke.'

James scoffed and prodded Luke with a stick, eliciting a weak groan from him. 'See? He's fine,' James dismissed coldly.

Derek, looking uneasy, interjected, 'I tried to warn you, Farid.' James, infuriated by the interruption, struck Derek hard across the face.

'Wait, Derek, did you kill those people?' Farid asked in horror.

James glanced at his son with contempt. 'Him? He can barely tie his shoelaces. I killed my manager for denying me a promotion—he deserved it. He came to see me after I left

the company, offering me a chance to return but at lower pay!’

‘So you murdered him—you couldn’t just say no?’

‘He needed to learn some respect—but once I hit him, it felt right, so I didn’t stop. It was like pounding clay, forming something new,’ James said, pointing to the macabre table of figurines.

‘And the other person? There were two bodies,’ Farid pressed, subtly working the rope around his wrists looser.

‘You’ve seen my art. I could have been someone, but that gallery owner laughed and asked me not to bother, the tosser,’ James said, his voice rising in anger.

‘You murdered him because he didn’t like your art?!’ Farid’s voice cracked, hysteria rising.

‘Well, yes. He wasn’t supportive or pleasant. Who did he think he was?’ James paused, adjusting the figurines on the table. ‘When that nosy journalist showed up after finding a note in the gallery owner’s diary, it was just too much. With the storm, it was easy to grab a branch and hit him. Humans are so fragile... Now look at my work; these are my best pieces. And you—patronising me, planning to leave... I

showed them. With each strike, I moulded a new reality for myself—one where I am the creator, the shaper of destinies. The clay... it understands. It yields and becomes what I desire. Unlike people. People need to be taught respect. They need to see their own frailties ...'

As James rambled, Farid's fingers finally loosened the rope. Just as he contemplated his next move, a loud crash and footsteps thundered from above.

Alan paused, surprised to see Farid's ID badge and lanyard lying on the ground along with his wallet. He tried calling him on the phone, but there was no answer. He looked up and saw the boarded-up gallery cafe. He suddenly felt a chill. He called the police and pried open the door, wrenching a plank from it. He entered the club and heard voices coming from the basement.

'No Farid, my cat Bertie means the world to me, that wasn't a lie. Derek is my son who has been living with me, but I prefer people don't know about him because he is a disappointment,' said James.

'Are you fucking kidding me? Cat guy?' Alan exclaimed as he descended the stairs, spotting Farid. In his haste, he tripped on the last step, nearly colliding with Derek.

'My son, Derek,' James said, stepping forward as Derek charged at Alan, knocking him sideways.

'Cat guy has a son! And still left everything to Bertie—you must feel real loved, Derek,' Alan said, wrestling to free himself.

'Alan, will you stop taunting them?' Farid called out, half-amused, half-frustrated.

'Give me a hand Farid,' said Alan as Derek thumped him.

'Kind of tied up here, but glad to see you ... and be careful,' Farid replied, a smile breaking through his anxiety.

Alan dodged a blow, grabbing a plank and swinging it hard against Derek's jaw. Derek slumped to the ground, groaning.

'Put that down,' James commanded, protectively standing in front of his table of figurines.

'Those are real bad. You get a D for effort and F overall,' Alan retorted.

'How dare you! These are masterpieces,' James said, lunging forward just as Alan took a broad swing, smashing the figurines into pieces.

'No!' James screamed, collapsing to the floor.

As the sirens wailed, Alan hurriedly untied Farid. Police burst into the building, their lights slicing through the dimness, illuminating the chaotic scene of rescue and ruin.

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On a radiant summer afternoon, Farid took advantage of his extended break and popped back to the flat to share lunch with Alan, who had recently transitioned to working from home. The warmer months had infused the city with an inviting glow, and Farid found himself savouring the lighter workload and the additional time it afforded him. He was enjoying his new workplace, although it was busy, the pace allowed him to indulge in planning future activities with Alan. After the tumultuous events of the past, he felt a renewed sense of contentment, more profound than he had experienced in a long while. Both he and Alan relished the calm and quiet of their new dwelling, which seemed all the more serene under the summer sky.

As he opened the door to their flat, a burst of laughter and a familiar meow-growl greeted him. Inside, Alan was sprawled on the living room floor, engaged in a playful tug-of-war with Bertie over a small piece of string. The cat's once

patchy fur now gleamed with a vibrant, healthy shine, mirroring the bright, cheerful atmosphere of their home.

‘Working from home really suits you, Alan,’ Farid chuckled joining the duo on the floor. Bertie, recognising Farid, released the string and padded over to rub against his leg, purring contentedly.

‘It’s best that I’m kept happy,’ Alan smiled, stroking Bertie’s sleek fur and giving Farid a kiss. ‘And Bertie appreciates the company. I’m so proud of him, he’s doing so well.’

James had made a request that Farid take care of Bertie, a responsibility that Farid and Alan had willingly accepted. Despite James’s troubled past and the consequences of his actions, this one aspect of his life was now a source of light for them.

‘Have you heard from James’ lawyer recently?’ Alan asked, casting a glance towards Farid as he picked up a fallen toy mouse and tossed it gently to Bertie.

Farid nodded, his expression thoughtful as his mind briefly flickered to James. ‘Last I heard, they allowed him to join a pottery programme in jail,’ he said, picking up the string and winding it around his finger. ‘Seems like he’s found a way to keep his hands busy, hopefully in a less destructive way this

time. Perhaps there is scope for rehabilitation if he continues to do well.'

Their conversation meandered, touching on the lighter aspects of their day. Bertie, now content with the attention he had received, curled up in a sunlit spot on the window sill, as he watched the world go by.

As Farid leaned back against the sofa, taking in the peaceful scene, a deep and emotional gratitude coursed through him. Life had indeed thrown them into chaos, but here they were, finding moments of joy in the simplicity of a quiet afternoon. The warm sunlight streaming through the window bathed the room in a golden hue, enhancing the sense of peace and home they had cultivated.

'Lunch won't cook itself, you know,' Alan said with a playful grin, getting to his feet and heading toward the kitchen.

'Right behind you,' Farid replied, standing and stretching his limbs. As he followed Alan, he cast a final look back at Bertie, the cat who had unwittingly brought them a strange piece of legacy—a poignant reminder of their resilience and the unexpected paths on which life could take them.

SET FIRE TO MY HEART

Sajan Rao lay on his living room floor staring up at the rotating blades of the fan. He wondered why the previous occupants had installed it given it was cold most of the year. Around him were torn up bits of paper. He had deliberately printed out his pictures of Hugo from his digital album just so he could tear them to pieces. He kept telling himself soon enough it would all be over, Hugo would be just a memory and a distant one and he would no longer think about him every minute of the day.

Conventional thought was that he would heal with time and he just needed to wait. But memories of his ex-lover Hugo tugged at the edges of his thoughts and clung stubbornly. His body felt frayed, aching for the familiarity of Hugo's embrace. Most nights he was clammy and cold at once, unable to shake off the pain in his chest that felt it was growing rather than diminishing with each day. He still found it unsettling sleeping in a bed on his own and each time he turned or shifted he expected to hear Hugo's familiar breathing. Sometimes he felt like he was living in a

daze, and going over the memories of the past repeatedly also made him feel uncertain whether he was remembering anything right, perhaps his interpretation of what happened was skewed by his grief and intense need to find answers.

He flipped open a compact and popped an antidepressant. His doctor recommended he continue on them, worried that Sajan would spiral into deeper depression. He had already sold his belongings, moved and quit his job. All major decisions taken soon after his break up. Sajan had considered mixing street fare with his prescription medication but had steered clear so far, concerned about being stopped by the police, a throwback to when he was younger and was routinely stopped by law enforcement for walking down a street - any street.

He stood and stretched, done with his daily meditation which had descended into a tearful session which seemed to make his senses more acute and his hurt feelings more pronounced. Before the hallway mirror, he studied his reflection, searching for signs his inner turmoil had begun to sculpt his features. It had been a year—too long, yet not long enough to forget Hugo’s silent departure.

Now in a new two-bedroom apartment, Sajan sought to shed the past, leasing out their shared home to Mr. and Mrs. Lissen recent arrivals to the country. Their story was one of whimsy; they chose their new home by rolling dice and throwing a dart at a map. Such freedom, such a sense of safety, astounded Sajan. Their carefree approach, a stark reminder of the ability of some to chart unknown territories with a sense of entitlement and adventure. It intrigued and intimidated Sajan. Handing over the keys, he felt a twinge of relief, eager to distance himself from the memories tied to the furnishings, especially the tacky '70s lounge bar pieces that Hugo found amusing.

Pulling on his trunks, Sajan grabbed a book recommended by a sympathetic bookseller—a lifeline thrown amidst his life's current disarray. That moment of vulnerability in the bookstore, his tears falling freely over coffee, was a rare release. With others, he armoured himself with pretence, fearing their worry more than his own despair.

His apartment complex, a fortress of solitude with its gym, pool, and silent corridors patrolled by cameras, offered a cold comfort. "Hello, you are being recorded," the cameras chirped, a reminder of the controlled, scripted life he now led—a stark contrast to the chaos and excitement Hugo had brought into his life.

The still water of the pool was a stark contrast to his interior emotional disintegration. The longing to confront Hugo, to demand answers caused turmoil disturbing his ability to concentrate on even the most mundane tasks. Information about Hugo's whereabouts remained elusive, snippets of rumours from mutual friends his only lead. 'I wanted to fight for us, Hugo. Didn't you think we were worth fighting for?' Sajan's voice broke. His conversations with Hugo's parents had offered no closure, only shared confusion and sympathy. The suddenness of Hugo's departure left too many words unspoken, too many feelings unaddressed. The weight of his unresolved emotions tethered him to a past that seemed determined to tear him up into pieces and destroy all vestiges of a normal life. He wondered if he would need to reconstruct his entire persona to move past the experience of Hugo.

The sun was high in the sky when he made his way to the poolside showers. As he approached, he noticed a woman preparing to enter the pool without adhering to the mandatory pre-swim rinse.

'Hi, please can you shower first before using the pool,' he requested, his tone polite yet firm.

The woman's response was dismissive, her eyes scanning the vicinity as if seeking an ally in her defiance. 'What's it to you?' she challenged, her stance confrontational.

'It's for the benefit of everyone,' Sajan insisted, pointing at the large signs near the pool attesting to this.

The woman's next action—a deliberate shove—caught him off guard, her hand pressing against his chest with surprising force. One of her long nails scratched his jaw and he recoiled. He pushed back. The ensuing physical exchange, a series of pushes and shoves, was uncharacteristic for Sajan. The woman flung herself at him hard, sending both of them tumbling into the pool in a splash of displaced water.

'You maniac!' he yelled, spluttering and coughing.

'Mind your own business next time,' the woman laughed, swimming away.

Climbing out, Sajan's indignation surged. He composed a stern text to the management before a wave of self-reflection stilled his shaking hands. The petty encounter had unearthed an anger he feared. Perhaps, he mused, letting go was the only way forward; he was too exhausted to hold together what little remained of his composed self.

In a fit of rage, he disrupted the poolside calm kicking and throwing the poolside loungers, his actions culminating in a defeated plunge into the pool. Security's arrival did little to shake his resolve as he floated on his back, detached, facing the consequences with a dismissive 'Whatever,' before retreating to his apartment.

On his drive to his parents' house, Sajan's fingers trembled as he sent several messages to Hugo, even though he knew they'd go unanswered—Hugo had blocked him long ago. The texts were simple, desperate: 'Why?'

He switched off his phone with a sigh, the screen going dark like the answers he sought. Why did he need a reason so badly? He could fabricate any story to soothe the ache—perhaps Hugo had fallen for a PhD student, as the faculty murmured in hushed tones, offering him their pity. Their sympathy only deepened his sense of isolation, spotlighting him as a victim, a role he despised yet couldn't seem to escape.

As he pulled into his parents' driveway, the familiar surroundings blurred through his watery vision. He wiped his eyes, trying to mask his vulnerability, resenting yet embodying the very image of abandonment he fought so hard against.

'You have shrunk, Saj, eat up,' said his mother, Asha, placing another steaming dosa on his plate. The familiar smell of home cooking filled the air, a comforting blanket in the family kitchen.

His father, Bal, looked over at him with a concerned furrow. 'Do you have enough money, son? We can help. You only have to ask.'

'No, I'm earning more at the translation company than at the university, and I prefer to be away from campus for a while, everything reminds me of Hugo.'

'I always thought there was something not right about Hugo. He was distant, as if observing rather than participating, I think ...' Asha's voice trailed off, her eyes softening as she noticed Sajan's discomfort.

'Mum! Please. I know he wasn't perfect, but I loved him.'

'With time you'll meet someone, Saj. You have a lot to offer,' said Bal, patting him on the hand, exchanging a sad glance with Asha.

'Bal, pass Saj another dosa,' Asha interjected, shifting the conversation. Her love was unconditional, often expressed through her cooking. Since Hugo's departure, she'd been

dropping off weekly meals, ensuring not just nutritional but emotional sustenance.

‘Saj, listen, I’ve been meaning to tell you, Mrs. Menon set her son up through a matchmaker. It’s going so well—we may be in for an autumn wedding. I could ask her about it and...’

‘No. Aren’t matchmakers for straight people?’

‘Yes, but they could expand their portfolio? Why not? It’s high time they did—there must be lots of demand.’

‘I prefer to meet people organically, you know, like how Hugo and I met at a lecture,’ Sajan reminisced, his voice tinged with nostalgia. He recalled Hugo’s laugh, the way it led him to that lecture theatre, and their discreet, thrilling encounters thereafter.

‘You are too romantic for your own good. Anyway, most people meet their partners online now,’ Asha chuckled, with Bal nodding in agreement.

‘That’s different,’ Saj mused, relishing the home-cooked meal and the ease of being with his parents. He realised how much he had missed these conversations, having isolated himself under the guise of coping better alone.

‘How so? Online, you put your age, likes, dislikes, job, who you are looking for—how is that different from a matchmaker? At least with Mrs. Menon’s friend, they meet the person first so they can see that they are who they say they are,’ Asha argued gently, her tone hopeful. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll ask her and see what they can do. You’re a good-looking guy, a good catch—why shouldn’t you get out there and find someone who sees how wonderful you are.’

‘Mum!’ Saj laughed, letting his guard down, enjoying the moment.

‘Hey, how are you, Saj?’ Jaya burst into the kitchen, fresh from work and exuding energy. She kissed Saj on the cheek, washed her hands, and joined the gathering.

‘You’re so late today?’ Asha handed her daughter a plate, her eyes scanning the flyers Jaya spread on the table.

‘I needed to print these out for tomorrow; I’m running really late,’ Jaya explained, her voice hurried as she showed off the flyers for an event at a club where she’d be DJing.

‘Come to this tomorrow, Saj, I could do with the support and you could do with a night out!’

Encouraged by both Asha and Bal, Saj took a flyer, his stomach tightening at the thought of possibly seeing Hugo. 'What if Hugo is there?'

'So what, you will be with me,' Jaya reassured, her presence a bulwark against his fears. 'You can't hide yourself away.'

Confronted with the prospect of encountering Hugo and his new partner, Saj felt a familiar queasiness. It was this fear that had kept him from the queer venues they once frequented. As exhaustion washed over him, he requested to stay the night in his old room, seeking the comfort of his childhood space.

His parents readily agreed, their presence wrapping around him like a warm embrace, promising safety and a respite from his swirling thoughts.

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The club was throbbing with energy by the time Sajan arrived. Jaya was already commanding the main stage, her beats reverberating through the crowded space. The dance floor was a sea of bodies, each moving to the rhythm of the night. With a resolve to try letting go, Sajan downed a few shots, each one helping to dull the edges of his persistent headache.

As he stepped onto the dance floor, a wave of freedom washed over him. The music was deafening, a perfect cacophony that drowned out his spiralling thoughts. The heat from the crowd enveloped him, a reminder that despite everything, he wasn't alone in the world. For a moment, as he closed his eyes and let the bass pulse through his veins, it felt like a road to recovery was possible—even if it was just for tonight.

Encouraged by this fleeting sense of liberation, Sajan immersed himself deeper into the crowd. He danced with abandon, his movements becoming more enthusiastic as the night progressed. The music, a mix of electronic beats and soulful melodies, seemed to resonate with something deep within him. As he moved, he occasionally made eye contact with other clubbers, sharing fleeting moments of connection that seemed to say, 'We're all in this together.'

As the hours slipped by, Sajan remained in the heart of the club even after Jaya had finished her set. His earlier resolve solidified; this was a space where he could forget, even if only temporarily. With each track that played, each swirl of light that danced across the club's walls, he felt a step further away from his sorrows and a step closer to something resembling peace.

The morning light filtered through the blinds as Sajan rolled to his side, the weight of another's leg draped over his hips drawing his attention. Next to him, a man with a faint smile on his full lips greeted him with a chuckle, 'Good morning, remember me?'

'Jake, yes I remember,' Sajan replied, his voice rough from the night's festivities. He propped himself up on his elbows, scanning the open-plan apartment with an appreciative nod. 'Nice place,' he remarked just as Jake leaned in for a kiss, which Sajan returned half-heartedly.

Despite the throbbing in his head from last night's excesses, Sajan resisted the urge to leave immediately. He recalled his decision to let go and opted to stay, a choice that felt increasingly like a test of his resolve.

After a refreshing shower, he wrapped himself in a soft towel, waiting as Jake stepped out to fetch supplies for a late breakfast. His gaze wandered to a manuscript lying on the breakfast table. Curiosity piqued, Sajan began to flip through it, not expecting more than a distraction. But as he randomly opened to a passage, the words stopped him cold. The manuscript wasn't just any story—it mirrored a

private conversation so accurately that reading further felt like an intrusion into his own life.

The narrative unfurled, detailing secret rendezvous and private conversations that eerily mirrored his relationship with Hugo. Each line deepened Sajan's sense of betrayal, the protagonist's internal conflict mirroring Hugo's own divide between a longstanding partnership and a thrilling new connection with a PhD student. The protagonist's draw to the student, cited for their cultural similarities, stung Sajan with its implications.

As Sajan read about clandestine meetings in a poetry bar—a place Hugo often frequented—the layers of shock accumulated. He glanced at the author's name and froze. It was a pseudonym Hugo had whimsically used online. The realisation that Hugo might be the author, that these thoughts and actions could indeed be his, sent a dizzying rush through Sajan. It wasn't just the betrayal of the affair that wounded him; it was the realisation that he, Sajan, might have been merely an exotic curiosity in Hugo's narrative, not a partner to be cherished.

The text laid bare Hugo's internal struggle with his feelings for Sajan and his attraction to another, described in terms that verged on the superficial. Sajan was forced to confront

an awful truth: in Hugo's world, his ethnicity wasn't merely a background issue; it was a dividing line that had insidiously woven itself into the fabric of their relationship. As this truth settled in, Sajan realised Hugo would never have stayed—it was never his intention.

As the words from the manuscript sunk in, Sajan felt his world tilting. Hugo's words were sharp shards, slicing through the fabric of what he once cherished. Feeling nauseous, he rushed to the bathroom, his body rejecting the bitter truth as violently as his mind.

Returning, shaken, he murmured to himself, 'How could you, Hugo?' Memories distorted, reframing intimate conversations into calculated interactions, the descriptors in the manuscript reducing him to stereotypes. Was he just an exotic chapter in Hugo's life? Sajan remembered a friend of Hugo using a racial slur, Hugo's dismissive excuses echoing in his mind, now a clear red flag he had ignored. The realisation that Hugo might never have truly seen him, only the 'difference' he couldn't overcome, was both devastating and strangely liberating. Sajan knew he could never have saved their relationship; perhaps its end was a mercy.

Hearing the door, he wiped his tears and joined Jake at the table, attempting to compose himself.

‘Hungry?’ Jake smiled, offering a smoothie. ‘Drink this, it works wonders.’

Sajan, still overwhelmed, nodded weakly.

‘Were you reading this?’ Jake inquired, glancing at the manuscript.

‘Yes, I just saw it... I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘Oh, it’s fine. It was submitted to us a few months back. I haven’t done much with it,’ Jake explained casually.

‘You work in publishing?’ Sajan asked, seeking distraction.

‘Part-time. I read for senior editors. What did you think of it?’ Jake was genuinely curious.

‘It’s a complex topic—gay men in an interracial relationship. It needs careful handling, and from what I’ve read, this doesn’t quite manage that. I doubt anyone could fully capture such a nuanced experience,’ Sajan said, his voice tinged with sadness.

'You've read a lot more than I have!' Jake chuckled.

'I'd like to meet the author,' Sajan said, an idea forming in his mind.

'You mentioned working at the university, right? You may know him. Lectures there—Hugo Benedict?' Jake said.

'I used to. I left recently,' Sajan corrected, his heart sinking. 'I was just trying to impress you last night. I translate documents now.'

Jake laughed softly, kissing Sajan on the cheek. 'I'm not attracted to people for their career choices.'

Sajan pulled away, he struggled to hold back tears. 'I'm sorry, I have to go,' he said, rushing to the door.

'Wait! Don't leave,' Jake pleaded, catching him by the arm. 'I thought we were doing good here,' he looked at Sajan worriedly, his blue eyes sparkling in the light.

Overwhelmed, Sajan sobbed, his emotions cascading out uncontrollably. Jake held him tightly. 'It's okay, it'll be okay,' he soothed, offering a shoulder as Sajan's world seemed to crumble around him.

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Sajan found himself wandering empty streets that twisted and shifted like scenes in a theatre. The air was unnaturally cold, each breath leaving frostbite marks on his skin as if the atmosphere were laden with pointed icicles. His chest burned with a phantom pain, and he pounded at it with fists hard and unyielding. As he ran, the world around him blurred, and he slammed into a door that creaked open slowly. Inside, Hugo was seated at a table cluttered with papers and books, intensely scribbling with a pen. Sajan pulled the chair back sharply, watching as Hugo tumbled to the floor. The paint on the walls began to bubble and peel, the bricks crumbling to dust around them.

‘You turned our love into a spectacle, reducing me to a mere curiosity of your imagination,’ Sajan declared, his voice echoing in the deteriorating room. He thumped his chest, feeling the skin crack open to reveal a glowing core of hardened light. His voice distorted, as if emanating from a crackling radio, growing louder with each word. Hugo’s figure disassembled, fading into the background like an old photograph dissolving in the light.

‘My worth is not yours to dictate or diminish,’ Sajan said, his words reverberating through the collapsing space.

He woke with a start, his body damp with sweat. Curling into a ball, he fell back into a restless sleep. The next morning, the remnants of the dream clung to him, the details eerily vivid. The imagined confrontation had unveiled a harsh truth—he had been clinging to pain and seeking retribution, actions that only bound him tighter to Hugo and a past he needed to relinquish. Whispering to himself as he lay in bed, he resolved, ‘It’s time to forgive myself.’

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Neon lights pulsed, and the air was thick with the scent of sweat and sweet decay. In this cathedral of chaos, Sajan sought a rebirth from the ashes of a life now deemed ordinary, a sharp departure from the once-believed uniqueness of his love with Hugo—free from the vagaries of common racism and prejudice.

‘Dancing is like dueling with the rhythm as your opponent,’ Sajan mused, recalling a line from a forgotten book as he pushed through the throng of bodies. The club was a furnace, its dancers flames—each moving with their own despair and delight.

Sajan wasn’t there for the music, the drinks, or the transient touch of strangers. He sought the alchemy of movement,

the transformation that came when foot stepped to beat, and the world fell away. He craved metamorphosis—to emerge from the cocoon of his own skin and become something else.

The DJ, a maestro of madness, dropped the bass like a hammer on an anvil, and Sajan felt the call. Muscle and bone, heart and soul, he surrendered to the rhythm, his body an instrument of the music's command. But tonight was different. Tonight, the dance floor was a battleground, and Sajan was not alone in his quest. His eyes met another's—a mirror reflection of his own frenzy. Zhang, as he later learned, danced not to find themselves but to lose everything. Where Sajan sought clarity in the chaos, Zhang sought oblivion.

The night wore on, sweat turned to steam, and the crowd thinned, but Sajan and Zhang remained, locked in their dance. It was a duel and with each step, Sajan felt something shift. The music was no longer just sound; it became a language, speaking truths he had never dared to acknowledge.

As the first light of dawn crept through the cracks of the world, the music slowed, and so did they. Breathing hard, staring into the abyss of each other's eyes, they knew. They

had found what they sought, but it was not what they expected. In that moment of silence, louder than any music, the truth revealed itself. The transformation, the finding and losing of self, wasn't in the dance. It was in the connection, the recognition of another as lost and found as their own.

Sajan stumbled out of the club into the cold light of dawn, alone. Zhang was a ghost, a figment of the night, gone as though they had never been. But the change was real. Sajan felt it in his bones, a shift in the very fabric of his being. He had gone dancing to find himself, but instead, he discovered a truth. Our mirrors are not found in the reflections of our solitary contemplations but in the shared chaos of connection, in the eyes of another.

The city was waking up. Sajan walked home, feet aching. He had sought to dance his way into a new self but found instead that it was not the self he needed to discover but the link to others. He realised that we are all dancing, not to find ourselves but to find each other, in the fleeting touch on a crowded dance floor, in the gaze that holds a world of understanding, in the shared rhythm of the human condition. And somewhere, in a place not marked on any map, Zhang danced on, a reminder that we never truly dance alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

O S King is an eclectic author whose work spans a vibrant array of genres, including short stories, art reviews, academic articles, and poetry. With a flair for the unconventional, O S King enjoys pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling, constantly experimenting with new forms and expressions. Their previous self-published collections, 'Reverence and Other Stories' (2020) and 'Smile' (2021), showcase their knack for weaving compelling narratives that captivate and resonate with readers. O S King's passion for unique storytelling is matched only by their commitment to exploring the depths of the human experience through words.

