

Jigglyspot and the Zero Intellect

PD Alleva

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Dedication

For those who love horror the most and the reader who understands that horror is so much more than just blood and gore. Although, we love those too.

“Haven’t you ever heard of the healing power of laughter?”

~ The Joker (Batman 1989)

Part I
Casting Call

6:34 A.M.
Friday June 7, 2019
Brooklyn, NY
Jigglyspot

Jigglyspot stood in the middle of a barren living room holding a mop handle. Morning arrived not five minutes before and now gleamed through the windows. Jiggly took a deep breath. The smell of bleach burned his nostrils, a fragrance Jiggly had come to admire over the past few decades. He was proud of his work, noticing how the sunlight reflected on the light brown wood floor and across the beige walls in the empty brownstone. He'd done well. Not a spot of blood remained from last night's carnage and mayhem. Jiggly would know. His eyesight was 20/20 and he could spot a pimple on a falcon if falcons ever had pimples.

He itched his stubbly cheek. White flecks from makeup crinkled by sweat-the cost of last night's labor-flaked across his thick fingers. He'd gone with the traditional frowning clown last night. A red frown with large black circles around the eyes. All else was white. Jiggly enjoyed the clown style, always had. And why not? Gacy was a god in Jiggly's mind. Plus, the clown style reminded him of home. People love clowns, but that wasn't the problem, was it? Nope, not at all. Jiggly's problem was with humanity, a species he despised more than he could fathom. Why? Because they have half a brain. At least to Jigglyspot, who always stared down on human beings as having not half a brain, but less than half, especially when compared to a Warlock, a fact Jigglyspot took with pride.

Jiggly always knew he was a Warlock, his Nana had said so. And it was Nana who coined the name Jigglyspot; a reference to the white spot of hair on the right side of Jiggly's occipital lobe and his always round stomach. It was the white spot that Nana said proved he came from the Warlocks, their signature trademark for any human who carried the Warlock gene which, according to Nana at least, meant that Jigglyspot was half human and half warlock, a reality that Jiggly also despised considering his contempt for humanity. Too bad Nana had abandoned him at the young age of eight. Double bad that the Warlocks had perished into the void millenniums ago, leaving Jigglyspot with no real connection to his heritage. Although, he was more than grateful for the otherworldly species that adopted him-something about their ancestors' connection to the Warlocks prompted the decision-because it was through their kindness that Jigglyspot fell in love with the clown style. When they first arrived to gather Jiggly into their circle, they did so wearing clown outfits for the simple reason that little kids love clowns-also because their true features would cause one large ruckus should they have revealed themselves in the open. And Jiggly's obsession with the clown style took hold on that very day.

But back to the humans. Stupid Human Scum is how Jiggly referred to them. The SHS or the Zero Intellect, whichever you choose is fine. He enjoyed looking down on them; inferior species deserve to be looked down on. Although Jiggly couldn't look down

on too many people, not with that pudgy five foot frame. Not at all. Jiggly looked down on people because on the inside he was large, with an energy larger than life, affording him a stature that crept through his eyes, those emerald blues, with just a touch more blue than green, when he stared down his victims. Made one feel hypnotized, circling, spiraling. Gone.

Jiggly laughed. Started laughing at least, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand. His heavy husky voice bounced off the walls like an echo toppling over on itself as he laughed out loud. Then a sigh, followed by a deep breath. His nostrils burned with bleach and a hint of sulfur that filled his eyes with tears.

Or was he crying?

Couldn't be. Warlocks don't cry.

And he had to tidy up; there was no time for tears. Finish what he started and be gone and leave the rest for the police. Of course, they'll find nothing. Jigglyspot had been cleaning up body parts and discarding evidence for so long the process came naturally. Jiggly was proficient and meticulous, always had been. Even in the beginning when fear controlled the obsession to not get caught. Well, with one exception, his very first clean up.

But *they* always praised Jiggly for his expertise in cover up.

They held him in the highest regard, knew his potential, and encouraged Jiggly's desires. Not that any human could ever see the rising stock of Jigglyspot. All he ever received from humans was a quick disregard, dismissing him and all because of his size. Little did they know what lurked beneath the surface, the true Jiggly. But Jiggly learned to accept their dismissive nature, which, over time, became his greatest asset. Humans have been underestimating Jiggly since he was born, giving Jigglyspot the upper hand every time he identified his next victim. Half a brain, remember?

Less than half, by far.

And Jiggly couldn't wait to hear the praise. He knew *they* would send the accolades soon.

Minutes Before 4:00 A.M
Beverly Hills, California
Tyler Reese

Tyler set his gun down on the table. He was tired and wanted to stretch. His victim—one James Reilly—was strapped to a chair across the table from Tyler. Bound by duct tape, James eyeballed the Glock 9 with attached silencer as if his eyes could pick up the weapon. Tyler yawned, closed his eyes for just a second, and James jumped in his chair. Not that he could jump too far. Tyler was good with duct tape. He was certain there was no way James could free himself. This being Tyler's first kill, he had to go the extra mile. One never knew what to expect. All he'd seen on television and in movies could have gotten it wrong; perhaps there is a way to wiggle free from duct tape. So, Tyler used all of it, just to be sure. No one needed a screaming James Reilly disturbing the neighbors at this early hour. Not in this neighborhood, at least.

Tyler fixed his eyes on James. He definitely used an amusing amount of tape. The thought—and of course seeing James exactly where he wanted him—brought a smile to Tyler's lips.

Now he was just staring. Silent. And James muttered, "Fuck you," his voice muffled by duct tape. Tyler ran his hand through his hair—those thick dark locks kept falling in front of his green eyes—then gripped the gun and pointed the barrel at James, who cringed and shuddered.

Tyler's original plan was another mass shooting, but after careful consideration, he decided all those types of shooters were pussies. Plain and simple. Killing innocent people when they should have the balls to stare down their victim, the one who caused so much trouble. Whose bullied torture over the years molded the killer like a sculptor chips away at clay to reveal the true masterpiece that exists within.

No, mass shooters had no balls, according to Tyler.

Nonetheless, what Tyler was struggling with was what to say. Of course, James knew why he was duct taped to a chair in front of his kitchen table in his parent's Beverly Hills home. He'd always been one of those preppy little creeps, thinking he was better than everyone and whose parent's success served as a free ticket to treat others like shit. It's called rich privilege, and Tyler was tired of all those rich pricks sitting up on high while the rest of the population scrambled and clawed at each other over the scraps from their tables, divided when they should take up arms together and celebrate their differences while sending all those rich shits to the hell they deserve. Reilly's parents were a part of the three percent of the population that controlled all the money in the world. Although they hadn't graduated into the one percent who owned even more of the world's wealth than the other two percent who were in their rich little circle.

If Tyler had done even close to any of the dastardly deeds James Reilly got away with they'd throw him in prison and forget about him. Too poor to give out bribes to the powers that be and too much of a nobody for anyone to care. Tyler would play the pawn in their little game of rich versus poor, an example that they were doing all they could to keep thugs off the street while allowing true criminals to walk out the door into freedom. And that's all it took, a large bribe and an unsaid favor and all those rich motherfuckers got away with bloody fuckin murder. James Reilly knew this fact all too well, and in return he got away with everything, no matter what it was. And Tyler refused to allow it to continue, not if he could help it. James would be his first, and, likely, his last, victim. Of course, he could go on a murdering rampage and shoot all of them, but he knew he wouldn't have to; the others will heed the warning. Everyone knew James was an asshole and his death is justified. But there was another side to the coin; if Tyler went around shooting everyone who ever bullied him, he'd get caught. The police aren't that stupid and there are school records they would look into. Any detective with half a brain could add, and two plus two was still four.

No, James had been as ass all his school career and Tyler had checked the school records. Twenty-two separate incidents and those were the ones on record. Tyler knew of at least a dozen more bullied rampages he'd witnessed with his own eyes. After all, they did grow up together.

Back to the problem at hand. Whether or not to speak? And then another question popped into Tyler's mind. Should he shoot James between the eyes and be done with it, or straight through the heart and watch him gasp his last painful breath?

He elected the latter. And what he said was very modest.

"You're an asshole, James, plain and simple." Then shot him in the chest, remembering the ridicule since sixth grade, mostly about the white spot, the circle of white hair on the left side of Tyler's head. The gunshot whistled like a dart. Bullet impact slammed James back in his chair and for a second Tyler was sure he'd tumble over. But he didn't. The duct tape held strong.

James was breathing, wheezing, like sucking air through a straw. Wet gurgles now, Tyler assumed it was blood in the back of James' throat. James' body bobbed back and forth. Blood, pouring from the gunshot wound, saturated his shirt, spilling down and across his pants, droplets squeezing beneath the duct tape to the floor.

"Look at me," Tyler ordered. He wanted to see his eyes; wanted to watch life leap from Reilly's baby browns to reveal the darkness where James was going. Tyler stood, the 9MM scraping across the table as he did. And then he screamed, "*LOOK, AT ME.*"

And the wheezing, gurgling, dying James did just that, giving Tyler what he'd wanted. Perhaps it was James' last plea for life, still not believing he could die, but die he did. Strapped in the chair he'd had breakfast in since childhood, by the table he'd eaten said breakfast on, James closed his eyes and died at the very moment when the grandfather clock in the living room let out its gong to signal the top of the hour.

Tyler's only regret as he quietly and meticulously left the house was the thought that James' mother would find him when his parents return from Monte Carlo later this morning. Their flight was scheduled to arrive just after nine.

"She'll get over it," he said to himself.

Especially when she discovers how truly horrible James had been. Just look in his room, find the bags of pills hidden beneath his mattress. How many lives had he ruined already? Bullying was one thing, addiction was another, and getting people addicted was even more of an asshole's pride, and James had befriended some sketchy people in the last few years. Everyone knew it too, even school faculty, especially when the cartel arrived to confront James last Tuesday. Tyler had watched while teachers and guidance counselors stood by and did nothing. Rich privilege indeed.

But what Tyler was looking forward to was the response. The response from teachers, students, and counselors after James is found. Tyler expected the response would spread like wildfire by the day's end. Probably around sixth period. Tyler will be strapping on his gym gear at that moment, getting ready to run miles for an hour. The school year was coming to a close and would end with a bang. Literally a bang.

Senior year will be historic.

9:00 AM
 Brooklyn, New York
 Jigglyspot

Now Jiggly completed his masterful cover up with one exception: he had to lock the door from the inside, then slip out unnoticed. This posed a problem for Jiggly, since people were walking outside, looking to catch the subway to work. But there was a simple answer, thanks to his compact frame.

He'll squeeze through the window in the basement after having locked the doors and windows. This particular window, Jiggly had noticed, locked in place when slamming it shut with just enough force to not break said window. The mop and bucket—having been cleaned thoroughly—should be smoldering at this very moment, mere seconds away from burning. Of course, the smoke will trigger the smoke detectors, but not before the mop and bucket raged with fire, quickly extinguished once the sprinkler system does its job.

Which will bring the fire department. Who will call the police. Arriving police will call the FBI and the FBI will send SAC John Mills, Jiggly was sure of it.

Now Jigglyspot, having cleaned off his face—most people wouldn't notice someone walking in the street, but most would take a second glance at someone wearing clown makeup so early in the morning—slammed the window shut and yes it locked in place, and waited for the praise he knew was coming. It always did, every single time once the job was complete. He surveyed his surroundings from the alley he'd just crawled into between two Brooklyn brownstones. Yes, there were people on the sidewalk. A few passed by, phones to their ears. It was when Jiggly stood—wearing twelve inch platform shoes so if anyone spotted him in the corner of their eye they would say that he was tall, just over six feet—that the praise arrived. The first was from Kera; usually the last was from her too, the others paying him less mind than his beloved. Although Jiggly hadn't seen Kera in a day's age, she always chimed in to thank him for his service.

Thank you Jiggly.

Another great night.

You did well as always.

See you at solstice.

Jiggly took a quick glance at the window on the second floor, seeing fire and smoke. Satisfied, he strolled to the sidewalk, a sense of pride in his step.

I'll see you soon Jiggly.

That last one was Kera, always the first and the last. Jiggly smiled, thinking of her. He'll see her again soon, real soon. Definitely before the others. Summer solstice was two weeks away, the biggest feast and celebration of the year. But he knew he would see Kera before solstice. Kera couldn't resist, never had been able to, and Jiggly enjoyed her indulgent tastes. Enjoyed indulging as much as he did.

Jiggly took the steps up to the subway platform, walking carefully. Jiggly had to focus when wearing platform shoes. Sometimes he misjudged the height and would catch the shoe on the steps. He held the rail for support, all the way up to where the train was pulling in, then hobbled in those tall shoes across the platform where the train stopped. A familiar ding followed by the doors opening and Jiggly stepped onto the train within a deep thicket of people. He gripped the hanging handrail to brace himself for when the train raced out of the station. Normally he'd have to sit or lean against the subway, gripping a metal rail by the seat to steady himself. Normally, Jiggly wasn't tall enough for the hanging handrails. Thank man for platforms. Jiggly was admiring his tall reflection in the train's door window when another voice chimed in from the center of his brain—that's how the voices came through—but this time there would be no praise, not from Emmanuelle, who was in charge of the solstice celebration. A certain hurried anxiety in her voice.

Jigglyspot, she said, We have a problem.

*7:00 AM
Hollywood, CA
Sharon Mable*

Sharon Mable had her dreams like everyone else. And like so many others, those dreams grew further out of reach the older she became. Not that Sharon was old, but in this town the new rage required youth and Sharon was about to see her thirtieth birthday, now just a month away.

So, when the alarm on her phone started buzzing, and Sharon jumped out of bed, she felt confident about today's casting call and her ability to speak the truth: she was still in her twenties. Still young enough to capture the hearts of millions, hopefully on the big screen playing a minor role that would land a weekly television show or another movie. Sharon did not like to lie; the truth was always the better choice since the truth always comes out, anyway. There was no reason to be caught in a lie, which to some was worse than lying, but not to Sharon. To Sharon, lying was the problem. She hated liars.

Sharon walked to the kitchen, yawning as she strolled across the living room in the two-bedroom apartment. Muffled music in the bathroom. Sharon's roommate and best friend, Cassandra LaRue, had to be at work by nine and she already made coffee. Sharon was grateful as she poured herself a cup, stretching her eyelids to wake up those tired eyes. Get some air in the eyeballs. She took her cup and phone to the living room and sat cross-legged on the couch. A quick sip as she checked her phone. Text messages first, always first. A small smile as she read Kevin's message: **I've got great news. I'll tell you tonight. Let's get some dinner. Around seven, OK?**

Sharon met Kevin Johnson six months ago during a casting call for a potential pilot episode. Kevin was on his way up. He played a minor role in last year's sleeper hit and was receiving more than a few accolades from the Hollywood community. He got the part on the pilot. Although the project was cancelled last month, Kevin's agent had called the day after with surprising news; Kevin landed a supporting actor role in a teenage drama. His star was definitely on the rise. Filming was set to begin in early July in Atlanta and Kevin was tying up loose ends. Sharon wondered, more than a few times, if she was one of those loose ends. In this town, relationships take a back seat to career, at least until you made it. Then maybe some lucky person would take center stage, although that never lasted long, either. Sharon knew it was difficult to maintain a solid relationship in the Hollywood industry, although many couples enjoyed the limelight and the familial relationships, but those were the exception, not the norm.

She texted him back: **Seven is perfect.**

Bathroom door opened, music cut off and Cassandra, looking pristine and ready for the day's labor, strolled into the living room. Cassandra was an assistant for a talent agency. The receptionist, really. Cassandra was the person everyone and anyone who

wanted entrance had to charm to gain admittance. Not that anyone could charm Cassandra. She saw straight through bullshit, loved her job, and wasn't about to risk employment for some schmuck with a dream.

Sharon sent another message in a hurry: **Where?**

"What time is the audition?" asked Cassandra, fixing herself a cup of coffee. She looked good and Sharon wondered why Cassandra had settled for a receptionist position. She would definitely make it on the big screen with those blonde locks and crystal shimmering blue eyes. But Cassandra always told Sharon the real money was in talent agencies. The money was abundant and there were no paparazzi camping out in a tree outside your bedroom window.

Sharon looked up from her phone. No response from Kevin. He must be sleeping. Sharon slipped her phone onto the glass coffee table. Arched her back, cup still in hand.

"Ten," she said.

Cassandra sat on a plush chair opposite the couch.

"Perfect, you'll be out before five."

Sharon remembered then, she had made plans with Cassandra for tonight, a girl's night out. She bit her lip; a common nervous tick she knew Cassandra recognized immediately. Shoulders slumped, coffee mug nested between folded hands on her lap.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"No, not at all. Kevin's got big news..." she said. "Great news about his career and he wants to celebrate."

Cassandra rolled her eyes. "So you're not coming?"

"No, I'll be there. Little late but I'll be there."

Cassandra eyed Sharon. "Don't lie Sharon, you're not good at it."

"Fact," Sharon shouted, an enormous smile graced her lips. Cassandra laughed. "But I'll be there, I promise."

Cassandra sat quietly, took a sip of coffee, staring out the window.

Sharon took advantage of the silence. "Why don't you like him?"

Cassandra met Sharon's stare. "It's not that I don't like him. I..." her voice trailed off. "I just don't trust him."

But did she trust anyone with a shaft between their legs?

12:32 PM

Brooklyn, New York

SAC John Mills

Twenty years. Same M.O.. People disappeared all the time, sometimes entire families at a time. Those who were good at it were never found. But then again, some people didn't want to be found, while others yearned to be discovered; the problem was that they couldn't speak, at least not in this dimension. Couldn't utter one word, not that they wouldn't, if they could, but being dead posed many problems for those who wanted to be found. And in the last twenty years SAC John Mills had seen more than his share of the dead but never had he recovered anyone who'd disappeared with the mop bucket M.O.. There was never even a true crime detected, except for the very first mop bucket incident. Nonetheless, Mills believed in intuition, the gut reaction, pure instinct, and he understood there was something waiting behind the mop bucket. And whoever was doing it had been taunting Mills for over two decades.

Six foot three inches tall, rough around the edges, dark hair turning gray and a stubble of a beard, John Mills stretched a pair of latex gloves over his hands, and crouched down by the mop bucket, charred and burned to a near crisp. A swarm of firefighters, uniformed police, and agents watching him work. Mop handle on the floor beside the bucket; the mop had been burnt to a crisp prior to the sprinkler system working its magic.

"Did you dust the handle for prints?"

He asked this question to no one in particular and received no answer. They all shared perplexed stares. To them, there was no crime other than arson, and why the FBI had to be called was beyond everyone in the room. If anything, it was neighborhood kids taking advantage of an empty home.

But Mills knew differently. Something sinister had happened in this very room, just like it did in all the rooms he'd seen with the mop bucket in the center. Twenty years and at least twenty mop buckets in that time. Maybe more than he was aware of; some people just saw no need to call it in; to them, it was a drop in the bucket, no pun intended. Some dumb kid liked to light fires and there were a ton of them to be accounted for.

But patterns emerged over the last twenty years. The mop bucket scene might appear like an isolated incident to the norm, but to Mills, it meant something more. His senses were tingling; his nose like a bloodhound picked up on something. Bleach, the faintest smell of bleach and...

He touched the floor, still wet from the sprinkler. Put his fingers to his nose. Sulfur. Behind the bleach was sulfur, as if the bleach was used to cover up the smell. Same as in all the others. Always sulfur, followed by a bleach clean up. Always an abandoned,

charred bucket in the center of the room. Mills stood and eyeballed the detective who was watching him.

“Were all the doors and windows locked when the fire department arrived?”

The detective looked perplexed, and Mills shook his head.

“Go and check. I need to know.”

That was another part of the mop bucket enigma; all the doors and windows were locked as if whomever started the fire had disappeared into thin air. Not that someone couldn't leave through the front door, or any door, and lock it prior to leaving. The dead bolts would be the problem, unless said person had a key. But how strange would that be? Same MO and what were the odds that the same incident always involved some dumb neighborhood derelict with a key to an abandoned house? Sure it was possible. Possible but unlikely.

The detective went to check the doors and windows, and Mills eyed a uniformed officer. “What's your name?”

The officer stepped forward. “Weaver,” he said.

Mills pointed at him. “Officer Weaver, you're on door to door, so start knocking. See if anyone witnessed something strange over the last few days. Anything at all, especially last night.”

“Sir, yes sir.” Weaver just about saluted Mills before taking his task outside.

Mills liked that; respect for your elders was a virtue going by the wayside in today's youth. Now Mills was observing, staring, searching. Eyes roaming. Other than the charred bucket and mop, the fire had caused no additional damage except the ceiling, just above the bucket, where a black circle stained the ceiling. Quite obvious to Mills, the fire licked the ceiling prior to the sprinklers doing their job; said sprinklers causing more damage than the fire. Water damage was always the worst. But there was something else, like all the others, there was something else. He could hear screams and feel pain, however faint and mute they were.

There were three floors to the brownstone. The first floor was a large basement, while the second floor served as the main floor with the front door and a stoop outside the front door with stairs that led down to the sidewalk. The second floor had two bedrooms, a kitchen and full bath with a staircase that led down to the basement, and a small narrow hallway that led to a second flight of stairs to the third floor, and the living room where Mills stood now. A large living room too, with three windows, two facing the street and the third looked over the driveway in between two brownstones. The third floor was a loft.

Mills was sure all eyes were on him. Not that he paid them any mind. Mills was well aware how ridiculous he seemed, but he had no time for ridicule or impressions. What these officers couldn't hear, see, or taste was the crime that took place between these walls. But Mills did. He always boasted a keen eye, a bloodhound nose, and an uncanny knack to see beyond what was in front of him.

Beginning at his very first mop bucket scene.

10:04 A.M.

Los Angeles, California

Delilah Hempstead (Goes by Lilly not Lilah)

Lilly had no time this morning. Everything was on fast-forward from the minute she opened her eyes, a full hour after her phone alarm attempted to wake her. Not that the alarm didn't try. It did its job sounding off at six, although Lilly never heard that all too familiar screech. One of her children-and she was sure it had to be Sam-must have turned down the volume prior to meeting the pillow. Those damn games again. Sam was infatuated with the games, and he was only six. What kind of future would that hold?

Anyhow, waking up an hour late resulted in a rash of get dressed quick and eat in the car on the way to school, Lilly's coffee in the cup holder all the way. She'd thought about adding one of her morning pick me ups, would have done it to if Christopher-Lilly's first born-hadn't been bitching up a storm on their way to the car. That boy couldn't find an elephant in a barn without his mother. Always losing things and this morning it was his earth science homework. Of course, it wasn't where he said it should be and of course the blame game-that would be Chris blaming Sam-escalated with Sam protesting he'd had nothing to do with the missing homework.

Lilly made a mental note to give the babysitter a good talking to the next time she walked through the door. That girl's about as useless as an elevator in a port-a-potty. Was she babysitting or on her phone the entire time? Lilly had given explicit instructions to make sure Christopher's homework was put in his folder and the folder placed in his backpack, which Chris had assured her he had done. The optimal reason for the missing earth science homework was Sam, with his tricky little fingers. Said homework had never been recovered despite Christopher's protest that his science teacher-one Ms. Finicky-would more than likely provide a bit of ridicule over the missing homework. Of course, this would happen in front of his classmates, none of whom Christopher cared much about with one exception: Jenny Crawford, who, according to Chris, was the most beautiful girl the world had ever seen. That being said, Chris wished to avoid a scolding from Ms. Finicky.

Lilly played the world's smallest violin, her forefinger moving across the tip of her thumb as they waited in the car line at Christopher's school. Those blue eyes narrow as she watched her son's reaction from the rearview.

"Do you know what this is?" Lilly asked. Chris eyeballed her and Lilly could see he was sucking it up, swallowing the tears and over-emotional entanglement.

"Don't I?" Chris said. "The world's smallest violin playing just for me. I know. You play it all the time."

Lilly shrugged and looked at Chris. "Well, stop losing your homework."

Chris went to speak but stopped before the words dripped off his tongue.

“What?” she said.

Chris said nothing. He looked out the window.

Lilly shook her head. “You’re not the first student to lose homework and you won’t be the last. Tell Finicky to lighten up. Take that stick out of her ass.”

Which made Chris smile. Just in time, too, he jumped out of the car like he was sitting on a spring. Lilly saw why. Jenny Crawford was walking into school ahead of him.

Lilly didn’t like Jenny, especially for her son. She knew Jenny’s mother, knew her enough to form an opinion that was for sure. They were part of the same book club, a passion Lilly was more than fond of; she even had a popular book review blog. She loved blasting an indie author. The way she saw it, everyone had a dream, but Lilly didn’t have to stand for someone else’s dream. If they wanted to be popular, then write a damn good book. No reason to fill it up with personal points of view, especially if those views were counterproductive to the rest of society, or, at least, Lilly’s society. And Lilly had no use for metaphors. The way she saw it, that writing style went out with Hemingway. But Jenny’s mother, Kathy, never saw it that way. She enjoyed a different perspective. After all, according to Mrs. Crawford, that’s what separated the human race, our ability to go against the norm and offer a wide lens with a fresh perspective. Lilly would cringe every time Kathy’s turn to share arrived. Lilly always gave a headshake prior to Kathy’s turn. Kind of a *‘here we go’* gesture. Rolled her eyes too, but that gesture came in the middle or at the end of Kathy’s review. Lilly otherwise remained quiet, waiting for her turn to speak and paying Kathy no mind. *You either agree with me or you don’t and if you don’t, then there’s no use for you*, was Lilly’s mantra. Always dealing in absolutes was Lilly; there was no gray area. She’d bash and tear down any alternate point of view if she could. Cancel that culture immediately. If it were up to Lilly, she’d have them all burned at the stake like heretics, if you believed in that sort of thing. Then again, if you believed in anything that wasn’t right in front of your face, you were already on the side of the foolish.

And that’s what burned Lilly. That Jenny girl was still on her mind when she powered up her laptop, ready to provide her opinion for another book on another blog. *She’ll grow up to be just like her mother.*

Lilly punched in her password, then cupped her coffee mug and took a sip. This time the pick me up was included. The glow of her laptop, home screen cluttered with so many file folders, the picture of Sam and Chris could hardly be seen. Her desk was piled high with books, mostly older books from a few decades prior. Lilly adored her e-reader and since then, print books had gone by the wayside. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the pile of books.

Still holding her coffee mug in her left hand, Lilly double clicked on the most recent file folder dated June 2019. Double clicked on the latest blog, the one from last week, then highlighted the text with a quick Alt-A and hit delete, then performed a save as and typed today’s date and, as she was typing the new book title and author, she heard footsteps on the stairs, circling down to the living room. Soft, subtle little creaks on the carpet.

Lilly’s husband, Tad, owned his own construction company; he had to be in Beverly Hills by noon for a formal meeting on a reconstruction project. Lilly watched him, now standing in the living room, fumbling with a button on his cuff. Tad was just under six

feet tall, well fit, with thick dark hair and brown eyes. His hair slicked back and his Armani suit fit him like a glove, black jacket hung over his left arm.

“Need some help,” said Lilly.

Tad turned to her. “Yes,” he said. “I hate these damn cuffs.”

Lilly bounced out of the chair, shuffling across the Italian tile. “Why don’t you use your cuff links? You’ve got over twenty pairs.”

Tad rolled his eyes.

“Guess not.” Lilly buttoned his cuff, then met his eyes with hers and ran her hands across his shoulders.

Tad stretched the jacket across his shoulders and squeezed his arms through the sleeves. She tried to meet his eyes, but he looked away. He’s distracted again, thought Lilly, wondering why the distraction. He’s been short too. Last night’s cocktail party was proof positive he had something on his mind; he barely paid her any attention.

“You look good,” she said, but received no response.

Instead Tad said, “You’re being too tough on Chris. Give him a break every once in a while. Take his side; let him know you’ve got his back. It’s tough out there.”

“That’s why I’m hard on him, so he can be strong. He’s hypersensitive, you know that. We shouldn’t placate him,” Lilly said, more matter of fact than defensive, as if Tad was a passive observer who required no detailed explanation for why things were happening as they were.

Tad stretched his arms inside his jacket and went into the kitchen. Lilly followed. “He’s not one of your book reviews. You’re always passing judgment on the kid like he’s doing everything wrong.” He took the coffeepot and poured the black liquid into the cup Lilly had left him.

Lilly stretched her eyelids. She’s heard this before; the same conversation came around every so often. Most people were like a broken record, always on repeat, with the same conversation, same complaint, and same catastrophe, but with different names, places, or faces. But Lilly knew her husband, aware that Tad would forget the conversation by the time he reached his car, so there was no reason to continue. Best to placate Tad and push it aside. Besides, she was still trying to put a finger on his real distraction.

A change in subject was required. “So, Beverly Hills today? How long will the meeting last? Can you meet for lunch after?”

Tad had the fridge open, his head moving left and right, searching. He was looking for the creamer. Funny, thought Lilly, how men can’t see what’s right in front of them. She walked over, grabbed the creamer from the door, and handed it to him. Tad took it.

“Not sure. Mrs. Reilly likes to occupy time, and she refuses to meet with anyone other than the owner. We’ve worked with her before, remodeled the pool.” He added the creamer to his coffee. Just a splash. “Now that was a lesson in hostility.”

He put the creamer in the fridge—not on the door though, instead he squeezed the container between milk and eggs, popping it behind them so he couldn’t find it later—when Lilly’s phone buzzed.

Her eyes went wide when she read the notification. Jaw kept dropping the longer she read.

“Lilly?” Tad’s voice dropped.

“I don’t think your appointment’s happening today.” She scrolled across her phone.
“Why? What is it?”
Lilly looked up from her phone. “James Reilly,” she said,
“They found him dead this morning.”

1:30 PM
Westchester, NY
Jigglyspot

Jiggly received bad news from Emmanuelle. A problem indeed, and he'll need to puzzle it out, but he already had a plan, the start of a plan at least. In his line of work, a contingency plan was a required commodity, a lesson Jiggly learned a long time ago because, as Jiggly will tell you, *'It's a poor mouse who only has one hole to run to.'*

He kicked off his platform shoes when he entered the door to his stately Westchester home. One of the many safe houses available to Jiggly across the globe, all of them owned by a shell company of a shell company of a shell company that was opened before appropriate records were kept. Try tracing that one to any living human being and you'd lose your mind.

Considering this new debacle, Jiggly had to drop dead weight. He stomped over to the basement door where he slipped on his sneakers, followed by the plastic bags he tied around his ankles. The old wood floors creaked beneath his transfer of weight from one foot to the other and Jiggly wished he'd not cleaned off his clown makeup. He preferred staring down on his victims through the veil of clown.

Plus, the makeup covered the pot marks and gin blossoms Jiggly despised. His face was filled with pot marks, his nose covered in so many gin blossoms it looked like rotting meat with a tinge of purple added to the skin. Jiggly leaned against the wall, listening. Not for grunts, cries or whimpers from the basement, not for the police or FBI nor agent John Mills, but for *them*, possibly listening and watching from beneath the folds of time and space. He'd been in the house for the better part of a month, the secluded location offered plenty of time for Jiggly to have his way with Mr. Zachary Lovelace, some heroin addict Jiggly abducted in the parking lot after the carnival closed for the night. Jiggly understood he took a risk grabbing the kid. He wasn't supposed to bring unwanted attention. At least not this kind of unwanted attention, grabbing Mr. Lovelace the way he did, in the wide open; although selling heroin, coke and meth as a means to gather victims was not only allowed, it was encouraged, although in safe and secluded locations only. Those victims were too fucked up to see straight, let alone understand when they were being abducted. Easy Pickens is how Jiggly referred to them. But the torture and... yeah, Zach Lovelace gone missing could definitely bring unwanted attention and Jiggly was told many times to keep it to a minimum, but he just couldn't help himself. He was always forgiven.

Zach had pissed his pants that first night. Jiggly smiled when the thought crossed his mind. That stink, stank and stunk should be all too sweet this far along. He allowed the thought to pass, didn't want it floating into the universe. He remained quiet, listening. When he was sure no one was on to him—because they had bigger fish to fry

right now—he opened the basement door and that stank tore out of the basement with a vengeance burning Jiggly’s nose. He took the steps one at a time, slowly; the weathered wooden steps creaked beneath his small frame. He enjoyed the slow, dramatic descent. That fat stub rack of fingers, nails grown long and sharp, scraped the banister on the way down.

Whimpers, muffled cries, and whines graced his ears.

He knew he had little time. There was so much to do and disintegrating a human body in a bathtub of acid required more time than most people know. Plus, he had to be at the carnival by six because skipping out tonight was not in his best interest. Leaving abruptly was one thing, leaving under suspicious pretense was another, and Jiggly had learned not to raise too much suspicion. But Jiggly was angry now. The job ahead of him would prove difficult to pull off, and he had to blow off steam.

Mr. Lovelace was that steam.

At the bottom of the stairs resting against the wall was Jiggly’s prized walking stick—well, a cane to anyone else, but to someone Jiggly’s height, definitely a walking stick. Thick and red with a smooth golden round handle, made from old wood that gave the cane a persona of something important with gnarls that cascaded down the cane that looked like lost souls in the throes of a painful, torturous scream. The cane was important to Jiggly, the walking stick was a present from the master of all masters, Mr. West, and Jiggly was all too grateful for the acknowledgement of a good deed. Jiggly himself had discovered Mr. West’s cane a few years after it had gone missing in the nineties after the Sleepy Hollow incident. Mr. West had presented the cane to Jiggly a short time after the finding, which also gave Jiggly a rise in power within Mr. West’s circle of depravity. When he reached the bottom of the steps, he gripped his cane with a gentle hand, like holding a baby, and turned to meet Zach’s eyes.

He always savored the moment, standing a few feet from Zach, hand on his walking stick and Zach grunted through his gag, a red bandanna squeezed into his mouth and held in place by duct tape. The same duct tape that bound young Zach to the metal chair he was sitting on. A red baseball cap covered his head.

Jiggly took his clown nose from his cargo pants pocket and fixed it over his nose, covering those gin blossoms. Zach narrowed his eyes and cringed.

Jiggly began to speak, his raspy thick voice bellowed from the back of his throat. He stood tall, like all skilled performers do. “For today’s entertainment, we have a host of games and prizes, all at your disposal. Everyone is a winner today, dear audience.” He leaned in closer to Zach, a glint in his eye. “And such games we have... for our wonderful audience.”

He turned his head up. “What? What games do we have?” He placed both hands on his cane, craned his head towards Zach. “So glad you asked,” he said and a sickly grin revealing rotted, yellow teeth graced his lips. He raised his voice, “For Zach, we have a wonderful game we call... *extraction*.” Jiggly lowered his voice with the word extraction, bowing with closed eyes when he said it. He turned, tapped his cane, then raised his arms. As if speaking to someone, he said, “Is that all we have for good ol’ Zach?” He placed his free hand on his chin. “Of course not. We have so much more to offer, Mr. Lovelace, and why is that? Because Zach, in order to extract appropriately, we must first create a plethora of fear and madness.”

Zach seemed to recede into himself, his skin so pale, his eyes swollen with dark baggage beneath the eyes. Streams of dried blood cascaded from beneath the baseball cap and down across his face, crusted and dried on the duct tape across his mouth.

“And how do we cause fear and madness?” That grin again. “Zach knows,” he hollered again, staring at the ceiling as if addressing a phantom in the room. He dipped his head to the left. A wide grin. “Don’t you Zach.” And he sighed, started twirling around the room, dancing with his cane. Jiggly loved to dance. He stopped behind Zach; a plastic tube snaked beneath Zach’s baseball cap, grimy and stained with a dark yellowish liquid inside the tube that stuck out between cap and strap.

Jiggly gently removed the baseball cap. Zach’s skull had been removed, his brain exposed. The tube inserted into his brain, directly in the top center. Jiggly lifted the tube and a spittle of fluid moved inside the tube. He gritted his teeth, snarled, and grunted.

“Not enough,” he whined. “Zero Intellect.” He leaned in close to Zach’s ear. “Is it you Zach? Are you really that low on the IQ or is it just your generation?” He laughed at this statement. Laughed at himself. “How unfortunate for you, Zach.”

Jiggly paused while listening to the subtle muffled whines from Zach before he took Zach’s chin in his hand, and forced his eyes to look at him. Zach was trembling and Jiggly saw himself in those eyes, Zach’s pupils large with fear. “No need to worry, Mr. Lovelace. I’ll just have to put in a little overtime on that ass.” Zach seemed to freeze up at that moment. Perhaps he wanted death, Jiggly thought. Who could blame him? Perhaps he was second-guessing his choices to do heroin. Didn’t matter, not to Jigglyspot, whose erection pulsed beneath his cargo pants.

And there was so much to do. He’ll have to go buck wild to produce the needed extraction. Jigglyspot was dying of thirst and he couldn’t stand another second living with those gin blossoms.

*1:45 PM
Brooklyn, NY
SAC John Mills*

Detective Tim Sims, a stout and overweight gentleman who Mills knew wanted to be somewhere else right now and not checking every door and window, led Mills to the basement. The room was open and wide, barren and stuffy, not a single box or forgotten tool remained. Afternoon light beamed through the windows.

"It's over here," Sims said, walking over to the window on their right. "Every other door and window are locked. This one too."

Mills dropped his head, frustrated. "Then why are we down here?"

Sims let the statement pass. "I opened and closed all windows and doors in case there were discrepancies." He reached up to the window, unlocked it and pushed the window open, let it hang for a moment, then released the window, which closed with a thud and bang, and the lock snapped shut. "This window locks in place."

Mills cocked his head, eyes narrow. "So, if someone climbed through from the inside, the window will lock in place." He said this to himself as if the window were the key to his enigma.

"Exactly," Sims said. "Although, it would have to be a kid no more than twelve with the way kids grow these days. No adult can fit through this window."

"Unless it's a small adult."

Sims pulled his gloves off. "That would be a very small adult."

"Detective?"

Mills turned to the voice. Weaver, the uniformed officer he'd sent door to door, was standing on the stairs about halfway up, chewing on a toothpick.

"What did you find?" said Mills.

Weaver looked at the notebook. "The lady next door said she saw a white male, dressed in a long overcoat, about six feet tall, this morning just before seven. Said he must have come from here. Watched him from the front window while drinking her tea. She said he seemed strange to her, like he was walking funny and his body didn't fit the frame."

"Body didn't fit the frame?" Sims repeated.

"Her words, not mine."

"What does that mean?" Mills asked.

Weaver looked at him, a certain tinge of pride in his voice. "Well, I asked her that same question and she said and I quote..." He looked at his notes. "Like a golf ball on a tee." Weaver smiled then continued. "And she said she thought he was wearing platform shoes, possibly to look taller."

Mills grunted in his throat, thinking. "How does she know he came from this direction?"

"Ok, well, per her statement, she's a people watcher. Loves watching 'the people,'" Weaver performed an air quote with his free hand, "on their way to work. Said it's her morning ritual while drinking her morning tea. She said he was out of place, and that she'd never seen him in the neighborhood before, and he just appeared. One second he wasn't there, the next he was. She would have seen him walking from down the street if he had come from that direction."

Mills registered Weaver's information. It made sense, considering the window and the platform shoes. Small guy squeezes himself through the window, then puts on platforms to disguise his height and walks away, slipping into the morning void as if he belongs. "Anything else?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, there is."

"I'm brimming with excitement," Sims said and Mills shot him a disturbed shut up stare.

Weaver laughed. "Gin blossoms," he said.

"Gin blossoms?" Mills repeated.

"Yeah, those things on the nose that alcoholics get from drinking too much gin."

"I know what gin blossoms are," said Mills.

"Gotcha. Anyway, she said it was the worst case of gin blossoms she'd ever seen. Said his nose looked like, and I quote, 'rancid meat that's been nipped at by rats for decades.'" He flipped his notebook closed.

Sims interjected, "There you go. You're looking for a midget with a severe case of gin blossoms and a taste for alcohol. Whoever he is shouldn't be hard to find. Start checking every carnival in the tri-state area. Start in Coney Island, then check every bar in the area. Keep going from there. Maybe contact cleaning companies to see if they've got a midget on staff who likes to set mop buckets on fire and drink gin." He laughed out loud and Mills turned his head, eyes narrow. Sims cleared his throat. "Sorry."

But he was right, wasn't he?

"Thank you, officer. Keep knocking, see if anyone else saw the same."

"Yes, sir." He turned on his heels, gripped the banister and took the steps two at a time.

Mills watched as he did so.

Sims said, "I don't get it. There's no crime here. Why are we wasting valuable manpower following up on leads for no crime? It's just kids lighting fires."

Mills turned to him. "Last I knew, arson is a crime."

To that Sims shut the pie hole, shook his head, and said under his breath, "We've got bigger fish to fry."

Mills ignored the comment and stepped to the window, looking it over before addressing Sims. "Get forensics to dust for prints on the window."

Sims rolled his eyes.

"And on the mop handle, too."

11:00 AM
Beverly Hills Private School
Tyler

It wasn't sixth period when news of James Reilly's demise spread through the school like a fire hopped up on speed; it was third period English. Apparently, the Reilly's flight from Monte Carlo arrived early.

Tyler noticed a buzz coming from the hallway as he sat at his desk. Mrs. Finnegan's lecture on the end-of-year exam was swallowed by the buzz and slowly erupting chatter. Tyler wasn't sure what to expect, and he sure as shit didn't know how to act. Just be you, he thought, placing his pencil inside his notebook. He was done taking notes. Felt his face flush red, a reaction he had not accounted for. And his throat closed. He had to force himself to breathe, to swallow air down his gullet into his lungs. Three seats up in the row to his right, he noticed Pam Glazier looking at her phone. He'd always liked Pam, had known her since sixth grade. Pam was the second student who received a scholarship for outstanding scholastic achievement in fifth grade, which transferred to a full ride at Beverly Hills Private School where grades six through twelve were housed in two buildings.

He felt her contract, her bones stiff. He couldn't see her face from where he sat, but he knew. Knew she was aware of Reilly's demise. Knew her jaw hung open, either reading or watching a newscast about James. That made sense to Tyler. James Reilly's parents were high society with notoriety. James' dad, Seth Reilly, was a major film producer and his mother, Lizbeth Reilly—or Liz—was an actress but not a very good one. Although she married well and landed bit parts here and there, which Tyler was more than certain directly resulted from Seth's power.

"Phones *down*," Mrs. Finnegan said, her voice scolding. She wasn't afraid to tell the rich kids where to go. Her eyes were on Pam, and if looks could kill Pam would not just be dead right now, she'd be looking worse than James Reilly.

Tyler saw James' eyes then, staring at him from his empty seat in the next row. All black, no iris, no pupil, no white, just all black, as if black glass had replaced his eyeballs. His jaw hung open and Tyler noticed then how James' lips curled into a grin. Blood on his shirt where Tyler shot him, and the gunshot, the hole in his chest kept pouring blood as if a river had broken through a dam. Blood pooled on his lap, confined by duct tape, although the tape could not hold this pounding river of red. It seeped, then spilled from under his shirt. A river of blood pooled on the floor. Tyler looked down to his feet, couldn't see them, the blood river engulfed them and was crawling up his ankles to his knees.

And James laughed, loud and feverish. Thick streams of blood like veins crept up Tyler's legs and squeezed. He felt pain. Pain that followed the blood stream up across his

groin, pelvis and kept going, squeezing and restricting, all the way to his neck, choking the air from his throat. Tyler saw his eyes then, as black as James'. Suffocating, windpipe closing and narrow. His hands trembling, body shuddered, trying, forcing, fearful, strangling across his throat until all he could do was draw in a deep wallop of forced air into his lungs like a drowning victim once they propelled out of water.

"It's ok Tyler," Mrs. Finnegan again, her tone now compassionate.

Tyler noticed some students were crying. Embracing each other. Pam caught his eye. That face, so soft, innocent blue eyes filled with tears.

Mrs. Finnegan was standing over him. She took his hand in hers.

"It's gonna be ok," she said.

Tyler looked away. Turned to Pam. Heard voices, students calling for bloody revenge, hell and damnation. Mrs. Finnegan crouched in front of Tyler's desk. He turned to face her, not seeing her, looking past the short dark hair and sympathetic brown eyes. Past the care worn skin, his jaw hung open. Finnegan patted his hand, smoothed her hand over his arm.

"It's ok," she repeated. "I know you got close to him this year."

*11:30 AM
Hollywood, California
Cassandra LaRue*

Cassandra popped a breath mint between her cheeks as she closed the door to the office she'd been in. She hated the salty, thin, and milky taste on her tongue. Had to get rid of it as soon as possible, because once the taste was gone, Cassandra can trick herself into believing the last twenty minutes never happened. Because forgetting was better than facing the reality that she was being played.

And with the memory stuffed inside a box in her mind and forgotten, she can go back to the receptionist's desk and focus on her work, dreaming of getting the hell out of the office and spending time with the girls later. Dream about leaving this damn agency and starting her own. She touched her forehead and wiped beads of sweat off her brow as she looked over the office. Busy as ever, and she was sure no one noticed, or, at least, no one suspected anything perverted had happened behind the closed door. The #metoo movement had changed little, if anything at all, in the typical day-to-day operations of the entertainment industry. Those predators just found more creative ways to be assholes like wining and dining and building a pseudo-relationship under the guise that they cared, actually cared for the victim.

Ira Monteforte, Cassandra's boss, was one of those assholes. They started dating a few months after Cassandra was hired. His ingenuity, drive, and passion had intrigued her. Fell for it hook, line, and sinker. She thought she was special, but as time went by, she tricked herself into believing the relationship was real, even though no one knew about it, not in the office anyway. Ira had said not to tell anyone because the staff would be jealous and would treat Cassandra differently, their clients and prospects too. And then it became something different, always resigned to a fling behind the closed door to Ira's office. At first it was exciting, a Hollywood love affair, and she caught feelings for him, at least she thought she did. Perhaps that was another trick on reality; Cassandra wanted it to be real, so she fooled herself and took on the role as the dutiful pawn.

And now she was knee deep in it, no pun intended. She wondered if she was sweating from anxiety or the extra work she had to do to get Ira off. At least he wasn't on pills this morning—just a little cocaine, according to Ira—because those pills were relentless and useless with helping the end result happen faster. Cassandra put on a smile as she walked to the receptionist's desk. She looked at the young man sitting in the waiting room and cleared her throat.

“Mr. Montgomery,” she said, and he turned to her with a certain excitement. “Mr. Monteforte will see you now.” He jumped up from his seat. “Last office down the hall on the right.”

Montgomery straightened his tie, standing tall. “Thank you.” His grin ear to ear.

“Good luck.” Cassandra watched as he walked to the door, waiting for a reply, but he never responded, kept walking as if she didn’t exist. Cassandra rolled her eyes. Her jaw tight. Another stuck up prick, she thought, he’ll do just fine in this industry. The phone was ringing, but she had no desire to answer it. She was about to take her seat when Sharon burst through the front door, sunglasses on, head down, and tears streaming from beneath her sunglasses. Quite obvious to Cassandra, the casting call did not go well. And Cassandra thought, Maybe we should get this weekend started early.

12:00 PM

Los Angeles, California

Lilly

This day was going to shit, that was for sure. Started off on the wrong foot and kept spiraling into a deeper pile of cow dung and now she had to deal with Christopher. She was so angry with him she could beat him with a stick until he begged for mercy.

“Take that stick out of your ass.”

That’s what Chris said to Ms. Finicky, prompting a call to the principal’s office. The result was a parent conference and a three-day suspension. She couldn’t even look at him. Her blood was boiling so fast to her brain she thought her head was going to explode. She needed this like she needed a hole in the head. Driving home, Chris sat in the backseat, quiet as a mouse. He was too quiet, as if he was proud of what he said.

“Why?” Lilly had asked, shaking her head. “Why did you say that when you knew you’d be in trouble?”

Chris eyeballed her from the backseat, glaring into the rearview mirror. “You said it.”

Lilly rolled her eyes, and shook her head again. “I said it to you, not her, and it was a joke.”

Now Chris shook his head and looked out the window.

“I asked you *WHY?*”

Chris turned his head to meet Lilly’s stare. “Because she’s a bitch.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“She is, and you know it. Embarrass me like that over homework. What right does she have?”

“The right to give you a failing grade and a suspension. Which will go on your permanent record, by the way. Try getting into an Ivy League school with that on your report.”

“I don’t care about an Ivy League school. Nothing but stuck up assholes go to those schools.”

“My God, I can’t even talk to you right now. You’re not my son. You’re an imposter. My son doesn’t act like that. What’s gotten into you?”

She knew what it was, that Jenny Crawford.

The ride home turned quiet and Lilly preferred it that way. It was obvious she wouldn’t be making any headway with Chris today; not in his current mood, and not that she wanted to, either. Not now anyway. She told Chris to stay in his room for the rest of the day after they arrived home; she didn’t want to see him. Tad would deal with him later; he’d gone to the office to go over some issues.

Issues?

What issues? She wasn't aware there were issues, but she was confident in Tad's ability to deal with them. Marriage was built on trust and she trusted Tad despite that nagging sensation that something was wrong. Whatever those issues are, Lilly was certain they would see the light of day, and soon. Tad operated like that: hold it in for a while, then open up. Although this time was different, Tad was holding on to those issues for more than a few days, seemed like months had gone by, which told Lilly he'd be opening up any day now. She thought he was on the verge of talking after the Reilly murder this morning. Thought he was about to say something when she received the phone call from Christopher's school. Instead, he told her to take the call, and that they would talk when he returned home.

She typed a quick text: **Chris told his teacher to take a stick out of her ass. Three-day suspension on his permanent record. I need you to talk to him, please.**

Lilly hit send, put her phone on the kitchen counter and opened the fridge where she located the bottle of white wine, thought better of it and closed the door. Opened the freezer, grabbed the bottle of lemon-flavored vodka and fixed herself a drink, a much needed drink.

The day started off on the wrong foot and kept looping on a downward spiral, and Lilly's anxiety was kicked into overdrive with Christopher's latest debacle. Plus, that nagging, sinking feeling refused to relent. The same sensation that conjured the thought she'd been holding in the back of her mind, hoping it would die: The worst was yet to come.

1:30 PM

Beverly Hills Private School

Tyler

He wanted to be alone. His brain was squirming, and he was having difficulty processing all the thoughts that raced through his mind. Tyler walked to the gymnasium and sat at the top of the accordion bleachers, leaning against the wall. Every teacher was in the cafeteria taking part in some psychological pow wow with the rest of the school, or rather, those students who hadn't skipped out after learning the news that one of their classmates was dead. Dead was an understatement. He was tortured and murdered.

Tyler had wondered how he'd feel in the hours, days and months after he killed James Reilly. Truth be told, he felt nothing. And those thoughts running through his head like a conveyor belt on light speed contained no thoughts filled with regret, but streaming thoughts recounting every fine detail of that murder.

He was meticulous by nature, had covered every angle and executed his plan with the precision of a brain surgeon. Took Tyler years to plan and implement, earning the trust of James Reilly being the longest charade he'd ever played. Sometimes, he'd laughed so hard with James he forgot what the true purpose behind the friendship was: a charade to gain trust with Reilly. To any outsider, the matter was simple: teenagers learning to accept each other while forming a bond that could last a lifetime. Of course, in the eyes of his peers, that wasn't the case. James sold drugs and there you had it because Tyler enjoyed toking on a little weed here and there. At least that's what his peers would say if they were questioned.

Reality was, Tyler had no love for weed. His life didn't require an escape plan for the mind; he was free in that respect. Tyler flushed just about every bit of weed he purchased with one exception: he required THC to be in his blood and urine on the off chance he was drug tested to corroborate his story. He did this a few days prior to the murder of James Reilly. Tyler wanted as much weed in his system as possible to reflect a casual user, but with enough time for his brain to relinquish the effects prior to the night in question. On that night, he required a clear head, needed his meticulous nature to be as profound as it ever had been, as if he was born to murder and his nature was a gift, a true gift.

Tyler turned to the large bay windows across the gymnasium wall. Sunlight beamed through those windows, casting streams of golden light into the gym. He squeezed his hand into his pants pocket, pulled out the bracelet he'd purchased a few months ago. Green beads with one red bead in the center. They brought prosperity, good luck, and good fortune. Tyler never liked jewelry, had a strange aversion to the feel of metal against his skin-truth be told it freaked him out-but he made a promise to himself that

when the deed was done, he'd wear them as a reminder of the justice he brought to the world. Plus, the beads were wood and not gold or silver, which settled his anxiety.

And he would do it again. If he had to, he would kill again.

The gymnasium door opened and Tyler snapped his head to it. Pam was standing in the doorway, bathed in sunlight. She seemed like an angel. Tyler cleared his throat; made a mental note to not seem so startled if they questioned him. Sadness was one thing, but paranoia was another, and any good detective might pick up on his reaction.

"There you are," said Pam. "I've been looking for you."

Tyler sat up, watching as Pam crossed the gym to the bleachers, her backpack slung over her right shoulder. "I figured you'd find me. No sense in attending that psychobabble group therapy bullshit they got going on."

She stepped across the bleachers that shifted beneath her feet. Dropped the backpack and sat next to him. Tyler hunched over, arms on his knees, his beaded bracelet between his fingers. Pam leaned back, stretched her legs, elbows on the bleacher.

They sat in quiet solitude, neither talking nor glued to their phones. This was the quiet time. A time to reflect. To place events and circumstances into perspective. Pam stretched her tongue and blew a bubble gum bubble over her lips until it popped, and deflated across her chin and lips. Tyler glanced back as she sucked that gum back into her mouth.

She smiled at him, then proceeded to chew.

Tyler returned his gaze to the sunbeams.

"Don't look so happy," said Tyler.

He turned to her, staring over his shoulder. Pam cocked her eyebrows then smiled ear to ear. That smile turned to a frown under Tyler's heavy gaze.

"What?" she said. "Nothing left to do but maintain, right?"

"Exactly. But blowing bubbles and grinning isn't a part of maintaining."

"Sorry."

Tyler turned around. Those sunbeams were gone, nothing left to look at anymore. He stretched his bracelet around his wrist and stood.

"Besides," Tyler said, offering his hand to Pam, "We're not out of the woods yet."

4:45 PM
FBI Office
Manhattan, New York
SAC John Mills

Mills had a gut instinct. Those gin blossoms kept ringing in his mind, looping back and forth like a smack to his face.

Short guy with a severe case of gin blossoms.

He was searching through known criminals in the FBI database, looking at pictures both new and old. There weren't many short men with gin blossoms. In fact, gin blossoms weren't searchable criteria. He had to enter criteria for anyone between five and five and a half feet tall, which resulted in thousands of entrants. And he had to examine every picture, zooming into the nose.

And his nose kept twitching, still burning with the bleach tinged with sulfur scent. Not chlorine based bleach either. Oxygen-based bleach was used in the mop bucket murders. Oxygen-based bleach destroys traces of hemoglobin, destroying DNA evidence. Of course, Mills had forensics black out the windows in the apartment and use an infrared light on the floor and walls. But the bleach had done its job: they found no traces of blood.

Twenty years, Mills thought. Twenty years of murder, conspiracy, and dead-ends. Mills often wondered why he continued on this path while under scrutiny from his fellow agents. And in that time, he'd gone through two divorces and had an estranged child living in Colorado whom he never talked to except on holidays and birthdays. And now he was going through a third divorce. Why he was assigned to the case was another mystery. Just like Sims had said, there was no crime other than arson, and the FBI shouldn't be tasked with finding such criminals. If it hadn't been for the very first mop bucket murder, Mills would be like the other special agents in charge, assigned to more promising cases he had a chance solving. But there was a crime with that first discovery twenty years ago. Same oxygen bleach, same sulfur, and the same mop bucket left to burn. But a mistake was made that first time. Perhaps the killer had just forgotten, or maybe whomever this gin blossom midget was, had wanted to be caught. Whatever the reason, leaving a human heart and over ten pounds of human flesh in the refrigerator like the owner of the apartment had paid a visit to the local butcher was either a calling card or a colossal mistake made by a rookie in the murder industry.

From then on, it was only the mop bucket. The first had happened in Florida, the second a year later, this time in Seattle. And when murders cross state lines, the FBI is called. Of course, that second time revealed no ten pounds of flesh nor a human heart or any other trace of a crime and Mills had wondered why he'd been called in, learning later about the Florida murders.

But the same MO was in Seattle as in Florida. A mop bucket soaked in oxygen bleach, a tinge of sulfur, and let's not forget arson. Too coincidental, and in detective work, there's no such thing as coincidence. Whoever was leaving the calling card had learned quickly. The family—recipients of the mop bucket killer—in Florida were a middle class family. DNA evidence revealed the ten pounds of flesh comprised a mix between the family of four—two parents, two kids ages four and eight. But the heart belonged to another. No match had ever been found. Considering the extent of the murder, the investigative results had landed in the FBI database along with the MO, and red flags were raised every time a similar scene was discovered.

And they were found. One every year, all over the United States. And Mills had knowledge of similar cases in South America, Canada, and Europe, raising the grand total to twenty-eight.

Mills chewed his bottom lip—a common occurrence when he had something on his mind—and his eyes narrowed. The picture on his screen was a young tike taken twenty-five years ago. He was arrested for stabbing his victim with a scalpel outside a local bar. Four feet nine inches tall, dark hair, blue-green eyes. Served four of a ten-year sentence. Current whereabouts were unknown. He'd dropped off the radar after being released. Lucky for him, he didn't kill his victim with that scalpel or he'd still be doing time.

Mills' first thought; could this kid have developed gin blossoms? First break in the twenty-year mystery and all he's got is a short guy with gin blossoms. Mills wasn't even sure how short either. Mills was about to write the name on a pad on his desk when,

“I got something for you.” The voice over his shoulder belonged to Theo Helmsley, a trusted CIA agent Mills had known over the last decade. Well-fit, dark hair and eyes, upper thirties wearing a blue shirt Mills was sure he'd bought at Wal-Mart. Helmsley leaned his arms on the partition.

Mills said, “Hopefully good news.”

Helmsley popped a toothpick between his lips that he wedged into the corner of his mouth with a roll of his tongue. “Could be nothing, but I keep thinking, short guy with gin blossoms and we're in the middle of carnival season.”

Mills cocked his eyebrows. “Come again?”

“Carnival season,” Helmsley repeated. “This time of year carnivals make their way through the northeast, so I'm thinking, since your guy is always traveling, maybe that's how he does it. He's travelling with the carnival convoy to stay under the radar. And carnivals have at least one short guy involved with their stage act.” He raised both hands, and cocked his head, in a ‘could be maybe possibly,’ gesture. “Not much but, here's where it gets interesting. I brought my kids to a carnival last weekend and there just so happens to be one of those short guys there. Real creeper too, just didn't sit right with me. Didn't want my kids anywhere near him.”

“Why? What did you see?”

He took the toothpick from his lips. “Not see, just a gut instinct. Thought he was a classic pedophile judging by the way he was with the kids, laughing and singing *Ring Around the Rosie*.”

Mills cocked his head. “Isn't that what they're supposed to do?”

“Yeah, I know, but this guy just had that creeper vibe. Like he was enjoying himself a bit too much. Kinda freaked me out. Especially with that voice.” He shook his head, eyes down.

“Voice?”

“Yeah, freaky, one of those raspy, thick drone type of voices.”

Mills sat back, and paused. “Did you see his nose? Any gin blossoms? Did he smell like gin?”

Helmsley shook his head. “Wasn’t close enough for the smell test.”

“Ok, what about the nose?”

“Couldn’t tell, he was dressed like a clown. Had one of those big red clown noses on.”

“Clown noses,” Mills repeated.

“Clown nose.” Helmsley popped the toothpick between his lips, then stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Anyhow, I thought I’d mention it since he fit the description. Might be worth checking out. Carnival leaves Monday morning.”

Not a bad idea, Mills thought.

“Thank you Helms.”

Helmsley cocked his eyebrows. “No problemo, if you’re headed there, let me know. Maybe I’ll come with. There’s a pile of paperwork on my desk, and I’d be more than ecstatic to leave it right where it is.” He tucked his shirt into his pants, gave his belt a quick pull up, and walked away.

“Duly noted,” Mills whispered, staring at the picture on his computer.

Twenty years and not one lead until today. Twenty years is way too long. The trip to Westchester was worth it, if at the very least to scratch someone off his list. Maybe find another lead, even if this guy doesn’t check out.

Mills took his pen, wrote the name of the kid in the picture on his computer on a pad-Milton Worthington-then spun around in his chair like a kid on a carnival ride and called Helmsley back.

When Helmsley confirmed the carnival clown held a strong resemblance to Milton Worthington, a trip to Westchester was indeed forthcoming.

*5:00 PM
Westchester County, New York
Carnival of Chaos
Jigglyspot*

Jiggly was beaming, the effects from the fluid extraction were hypnotizing, awakening his senses and indulgences like a hawk who identified a prize meal in a thick forest, locked in and seething from the mouth in anticipation of the feast he was about to receive. Mr. Lovelace had served his purpose, a far greater purpose than where he was going. Another junkie that'll cost the public hundreds of thousands in drug treatment, therapies, medicine and more than likely prosecution, since just about every junkie had some criminal record. Jiggly enjoyed the junkies, alcoholics, and addicts; they were always easy prey.

Jiggly had to dig deep into Mr. Lovelace to receive the desired and necessary extraction, but it was well worth it. This sensation will remain with Jiggly for at least a week. Reeling and feeling larger than life, he strode across the shopping mall parking lot towards the Carnival of Chaos. His hearing was on high alert, listening to the carnival sounds as if they made their way to his ears through speakers that were as clear as a bell. Rides and games, laughter, and parents calling after their kids. The early go-getters-as Jiggly referred to them-were people who arrived before sunset to indulge in carnival nostalgia. And then there were the smells, the scents that brought nostalgia with a wave of precious remembering: cotton candy, deep-fried sugar coated breads, sausage, peppers and onions, and ice cream. One can never forget the ice cream. He drew in a deep breath, sensing a thicket filled with excited energy as the sun beamed bright, beginning its descent into night as he entered through the employee entrance behind the wonder wheel.

Jiggly entered the trailer for employees. He had to prepare; his clown makeup and costume were waiting. The trailer, a doublewide, was bustling with employees preparing for their nightly duties. Jiggly looked at the whiteboard on the wall where the night's posts were listed. On his right was a bathroom, door closed. To his left the doublewide opened with a U shaped couch, tattered from years of use, a coffee table in front of the couch led to the entrance to the second part of the doublewide. A television hung from the wall between the two entrances, forcing most everyone to bend down to enter. Beyond the couch is a small kitchen and beyond that, a bedroom. Music filled the doublewide, the latest EDM. Incoherent chatter beneath the music and the television was stuck on a news channel in silent reverie.

The doublewide was wall to wall filled with employees, and Jiggly wondered if anyone was actually working the carnival. Bodies on the couch, cocaine on the coffee table, and Jiggly recognized how Sandra was giving Kipp a blowjob on the couch.

Heathens, Jiggly thought. He despised that Kipp, the strongman in the carnival, and wondered how long it had been since he'd bathed. Sandra was always giving blowjobs, so that wasn't anything new; perhaps she enjoyed the taste of ball sweat. Typical Friday night for the Carnival of Chaos.

Jiggly spotted his name on the board and smiled. He'll be working the House of Horrors tonight, Jiggly's favorite post, because there's nothing better than scaring the shit out of a bunch of kids, and on a Friday night the teenagers will be in abundance and that was where Jiggly prized himself the most, watching their interactions as they waited in line. He enjoyed finding that one teenage boy who propped himself up to be something larger than he was. Jiggly loved to relieve his frustrations on such a teenager, the perfect target. Hoped they shit their pants, too. He'd give himself extra kudos if he could get one to shit their pants.

"Jiggs, where have you been?"

The voice belonged to Jasmine; she always worked the basketball game. She must have been in the bathroom when Jiggly arrived. Now she stood a foot away, naked except for the black silk underwear. Jasmine was five foot six, with dark hair and dark eyes. Jiggly was eye level with Jasmine's breasts.

"Cat got your tongue," she said and shook her shoulders.

Jiggly broke his concentration. Turned his eyes to Jasmine's.

"My lady," Jiggly said. "I'm always fashionably late." He noticed how her eyes darted over to the couch as if she was missing Kipp's climax.

She returned her eyes to Jiggly. "You got something for me?"

"Of course. Don't I always." He produced a small baggie with three oxycodone pills and Jasmine stepped closer, took the bag in her hand and touched Jiggly's shoulder.

"I'll get you later," she said. "Need to skim off the top tonight." She moved closer and Jiggly thought about stretching his tongue to those breasts they were so close. Although Jiggly's heart belonged to Kera, he wasn't a fool. Everyone has needs, and Kera was not available to fulfill those needs every time Jiggly got a little hot in his pants. He chose to keep his tongue to himself.

"Do what you must, my lady. I'll get with you later." Jiggly knew she was good for it. Plus, those three pills will lose effect before the carnival closed, and she'll be looking for something more. She'll probably skim off a little too much tonight, which was always common occurrence. Everyone was skimming, but sometimes they took it a bit too far and found themselves abandoned when the time to pick up and move to the next town arrived.

"Thank you Jiggs. I can always count on you. You look different, by the way." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. Jiggly felt the warmth of her breath and her nipples on his chin.

Jasmine walked over to the couch, and joined Sandra with bringing that climax to fruition. Jiggly rolled his eyes. The SHS was in full bloom tonight and Jiggly sensed in his bones it would be a good night. Someone, somewhere, at some point in time, would offer themselves to Jiggly, not willingly or knowingly either, or at least not consciously. Sometimes a soul required a challenge and leapt at said challenge without providing knowledge to the conscious mind, much like Mr. Lovelace. Sometimes the subconscious just took over in its primitive reptilian state.

Jiggly went to the back room to prepare, thinking about his transformation into his prize clown makeup. Frown or smiley face? Sad or happy? Devious or gentle? A tear or little stars beneath the eyes? These were the questions on Jiggly's mind. What he knew was that no matter how the makeup looked, he will be prepared. Jiggly patted his right front pocket, where a thin round bulge of four inches brought a twinkle to his eye. Jiggly's go to weapon always brought that twinkle.

In his pocket was Jiggly's prize weapon. In his pocket was his trusted, Mr. Scalpel.

*2:30 PM
Hollywood, California
Sharon*

She allowed herself to cry, to shed a few tears in the presence of her friend and confidant, Cassandra. No, she did not get the part, but it was more than just the part. Sharon believed that with the big Three-O right around the corner, time was slipping through her fingers like sands through the hourglass. She'd thought by now she would have had some notoriety, some bit part at least, but those dreams were dissipating and in its place, a cloud of reality was forming. Sure, she was big around the hips, but in today's world, why does that matter? It doesn't. Shouldn't, but still it does. She convinced herself some years ago that the world was entering a new renaissance and thick around the hips would be seen as it should be, sexy.

Did she just play the fool to her own beliefs? Accepting this reality brought her to tears. The waiter gently placed her second glass of white wine on the table. The alcohol helped numb the solution. Said solution being: put your energy into something else, Sharon. An identity crisis indeed. But what could she do? Sharon was at a loss for the future and it looked grim, spiraling out of control and she couldn't hold on, couldn't hold on to anything.

"What's the real fear?" asked Cassandra, nursing her first glass of wine, her fingers over the glass like a spider web.

Aside from being Sharon's only real friend, Cassandra offered viable psychological advice. Who needs a therapist when Cassandra has the answers?

To Cassandra's question, Sharon had to suck back the tears. Reality sometimes can be such a pain in the ass to accept. Sharon took another sip, savored the dry flavor on her tongue before forcing the fluid down her closing throat. Returned the glass to the table and sucked back a snuffle.

"That I'm not good enough," Sharon answered. This was indeed turning into a therapy session.

Cassandra placed her right hand over her left on the table. "That's a false fear," she said. "In my time, I've seen an abundance of talent who never land a single part. It has nothing to do with talent or the way you look, but whether or not your look is relevant."

This was the part about Cassandra that Sharon despised. Not only did she have it all together, her star on the rise, and Sharon was sure Cassandra will own her own agency in the years or decades to come, but Cassandra also told the truth. Knew the truth and forced the truth down your throat without an inkling of pity or empathy. Kind of a, 'suck it up' bitterness that made your head spin, wanting to ring Cassandra by that thin gullet and squeeze until all your rage and anger were satisfied.

“Relevant to what?” Sharon’s voice cracked as she held back her tears. She was tired of crying and frustrated with feeling emotion. Get your head together, she told herself. Maintain some sort of dignity. She sat up, stretched her spine, shoulders back. Sharon was always hunched over. She had to make a conscious effort to keep those shoulders back. Posture was paramount to pride.

“To the latest trends. To what is making money so Hollywood can pump out the same version with new names that capitalize on the trend. Trends are always coming and going so when you’ve got a new cash cow you milk it for all its worth then wring out the excess, keep it in a bucket hoping the same trend will come back and you’ll be ready with a copyright and trademark to spit out and capitalize once again. That’s why they’re always remaking and reinventing and redistributing.” She leaned back in her seat, hands folded on her lap. “People like to remember, to feel the way they did when they were young. Art,” she said, “Movies, music, books... they all have their mini resurgence. Sure there’s the artsy fartsy movies that pop in every once in a generation to enthrall the audience with a reminder that movies can be art with a masterful craftsmanship but look around, most of what’s on the big screen are regurgitated crap.” She looked at her lap, folded her napkin, and Sharon noticed Cassandra’s hands had the slightest bit of a tremble.

Cassandra looked out the window, possibly avoiding Sharon’s stare. Cassandra sipped her wine, quiet as a mouse.

Sharon broke the silence. “So, what’s the new trend?” Cassandra met Sharon’s eyes. The look in her eyes revealed a *‘how do you not know’* stare. Sharon cleared her throat. “I mean...” she sat forward. “You see what’s coming down the pipe, right? What scripts they’re pitching. What actors they’re looking for. What’s the next trend?” She sipped her wine, then arched her back.

“Hard to say.” Cassandra shifted in her seat. “I don’t see the scripts. I just admit the actors Ira requests.”

“Ira.” Sharon shook her head. “Still can’t get me a meeting with him?”

Cassandra cringed, seemed to melt into the back of her chair. “I told you what he said when I first started.”

“I know, I know. *Don’t force your friends on me,*” said Sharon, mimicking Ira’s firm voice. “But is it possible to find out what scripts he’s casting? What actors the studios are requesting? If we know what they’re looking for, we can conform to meet those needs. Maybe slip in a new headshot. Ira would never have to know.”

“He’s seen you at the office. How could he not?”

“Well, I’m sure we can hedge that bet when we get to it. First things first, though. Find out what they’re looking for.”

Judging by Cassandra’s reaction, the stiff body language and refusal to meet Sharon eye to eye, Sharon was sure Cassandra wanted nothing to do with it. What would it mean to the friendship? Cassandra forcing her friend down her boss’ throat. Sneaking around the office for information she was not supposed to have. There were always Non-Disclosure Agreements in the industry and this snooping could mean Cassandra’s job. Nonetheless, Sharon knew she would do it. Cassandra was that kind of friend. Even if she knew the relationship would never be the same. How could it, after all? Mutual respect flew out the door once jealousy and having something to hold over the other’s head

existed. But for Sharon, this was the break she needed. Isn't that how it went? Knowing someone who knows someone who has someone else holding something over their head so they vouch for said person and the next thing you know, a star is born?

Oh Hollywood. Sharon was indeed on her way up.

*6:30 PM
Westchester County, NY
Carnival of Chaos
SAC John Mills*

“Bang, you’re dead,” said the seven-year-old boy holding two cap guns, one in each hand. He squeezed those triggers and the crack, snap, and pops from both guns spun Mills and Helmsley with a jolt and nervous twitch in his direction. Helmsley drew his weapon, a .38 snub nose, and Mills held his hand on his Glock, still in the holster on his right hip but never drew down; and the boy’s eyes lit up. Not with fear, mind you, but with a certain intrigue cast from wonder and a desire to explore, seek and discover that only little kids possessed. Smoke drifted from the cap guns, whisked away by the spring breeze, and disappeared.

Mills felt his heart stop, felt the entire world come to a crashing halt. The scene in a perpetual state of slow motion. God Consciousness, he’d remind himself later. Where time slowed to an aching crawl and within that time, thought processes are as clear as a bell. Mills called to Helmsley to draw down, saw his finger inch over the trigger, about to fire a round into the boy. But Mills was quick, on top of Helmsley before he could pull the trigger. One hand on Helmsley’s .38, now pointed to the ground, and the other on Helmsley’s shoulder. Mills heard himself speak, his voice in Helmsley’s ear although he never felt his lips move nor did he feel the voice vibration in his throat, but it was his voice. “Stand down, it’s not a real gun.”

And then the scene, or time, hopped back on the track, caught a rail and was ticking away at normal speed. Mills shook his head.

The boy laughed something awful and sinister, said, “You gonna shoot me, policeman?”

Helmsley holstered his weapon. “Get the hell outta here,” he hollered, his face flushed and Mills could feel Helmsley’s heart pound in his chest. He missed his holster on his first attempt to put away his weapon.

“Bang, bang, bang,” the boy said, firing his caps in rapid succession and with every loud pop Helmsley’s body jumped.

“Jesus H. Christ, I said get outta here.” Helmsley stepped forward as if to chase the boy who ran and hid beneath the doublewide they were standing in front of. Helmsley kicked the dirt, sending a cloud in the air.

Mills noticed the doublewide window then, the blinds creaked and snapped closed. Someone was watching.

Mills turned to Helmsley, said, “Get a hold of yourself, officer.”

Helmsley blurted, “Fucking kids with guns. I thought they stopped selling those things.”

“Well, they didn’t, so get your act together.” Quite obvious to Mills that Helmsley had never seen field action before. He heard the doublewide door open and close.

“Can I help you?” a woman’s voice. Mills turned to the voice. A young lady, no more than twenty-five, was on the steps to the front door. She craned her head, searching beneath the doublewide. “Casper,” she said. “Leave these two officers alone.” She wore black pants and a red shirt with the name Carnival of Chaos embroidered on the polo shirt. Hair tied in a bun and pinned to her head by the navy blue hat she wore, also embroidered with Carnival of Chaos.

Mills didn’t bother asking how she knew they were officers. Better to let that one go. Casper shot a few more caps, then went silent.

“Your kid?” said Helmsley.

“That he is. Loves cops too, as you can see.”

“Well, put a leash on him. He almost took a few bullets. Real ones too.”

“He’s just playing around. Maybe you shouldn’t be so hyped up, officer.”

Mills stepped in, looked at Helmsley, then back to the lady. “We’re sorry,” he said. “I’m SAC John Mills with the FBI, and this is CIA agent Helmsley.” He stepped closer, noticed she didn’t give her name, stood there, staring and Mills noticed how her eyes were like pins as if the soul had retreated into darkness. A common occurrence among drug abusers. “And you are?”

“None of your business,” she said, one hand on the railing.

“Well, that’s not playing nice now, is it?”

She took a moment to consider this. At least, that’s what Mills thought she was doing. “Jasmine,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re looking for Milton Worthington. Need to have a few words with him.”

Jasmine shrugged, and Mills could see by her body language that she had no clue who Milton Worthington was.

“Short guy, about five feet tall, early forties, dark hair, blue-green eyes...”

“You mean Jiggs.”

“Come again?”

“Jigglyspot, or Jiggs, as we call him. He’s the only one here about that height.”

“Jigglyspot,” Mills repeated.

“That’s what I said.”

“Can you tell me where he is?”

She considered this for a moment, then raised her hand, pointing. “He’s in the haunted house, scaring some young ones and parents to all bloody hell.” And she laughed as if she was amused by the prospect of Jigglyspot doing what Jigglyspot does best, scare the bejesus out of people, and the FBI were walking into that fate, and that right soon. She seemed very satisfied.

“Any way we can talk to him without roaming the haunted gallows?” said Mills.

The disappointed stare that registered across Jasmine’s face was priceless. She shook her head, tight-lipped, that disappointed stare locked on the officers. Mills waited for a response. When none came, “Mam?”

“Hold on, I’ll get Hal.”

“Hal?” said Helmsley, stepping forward.

Jasmine paused with one hand on the doorknob before she turned to the detectives. “Hal owns the carnival. I think he should handle this.” And then she gave a quick, strange curtsy and smiled. “I just work the basketball game,” she said, and disappeared through the door.

3:45 PM

Beverly Hills, California

Tyler

He was still seeing black eyeballs. But now they weren't reserved to his visions and daydreams; he saw black eyeballs in everyone he greeted, met or passed in the hallway, on the street, and in the coffee shop where he sat now, in the corner by the window so he could watch and observe with a keen eye all who wandered into the shop on the off chance he was being followed and had shown up on police radar. A black coffee between his fingers, which he sipped every so often. Tyler had no use for coffee, but he went to the cafe to process his thoughts and he had to order something. He hadn't expected the black eyeballs. Tyler wondered if a door in his mind had opened. Some essence of knowledge only murderers could see, because they crossed the line between what is human and what is God.

Was he doing God's work?

James Reilly was a good choice for his first victim. What would Reilly have grown up to be if not a sadist? Getting people hooked on pills and who knows what else. And Tyler had been waiting months for the final piece in his puzzle of murder and revenge to land in his lap and a month ago his moment finally arrived. Tyler had gone to the Reilly house to pick up a fat ounce of flower. Not that he used marijuana, but the sale was part of the ploy from the very beginning. If you want to plan a murder and get away with it, you had to be patient. It was better to wait, assess, observe, plan, and evaluate, allowing the plan to unfold on its own. The trick was to take advantage of the moment and that's exactly what Tyler accomplished on that night. Acting stupid like high people do, he set off the house alarm which prompted James to storm out of his bedroom, rush down the stairs and reset the alarm—punch in the code and provide the password to the alarm company once the phone rang, which was standard protocol. Tyler had played the part without a hitch. James, being preoccupied with returning to his bedroom, talked loud enough for Tyler to pick up on the password: DumbFuck. Tyler found that ironic. As would the rest of the world, irony being a manifestation of one's own arrogance.

Tyler popped on his sunglasses when the sun stretched its beams through the cafe window to squint his eyes. Felt his body temp raise a few notches and a single bead of sweat form above his lip, still watching the street.

Am I acting suspicious?

He looked at his phone because that's what teenagers do nowadays and he needed to act inconspicuous. Notification after notification. Text messages galore. Tyler was part of a group text that was ringing off a few messages at a time within every second.

Still can't believe it.

Cops are at school.

Questioning everyone.

I miss him already.

R.I.P. James Reilly.

Tyler punched in a message, thought better of it, deleted what he'd written, then added something new.

I hope they catch the MOFO who did this. Long Live King James. Miss you, brother.

He put his phone down and turned to the window, coffee cup resting in both hands. His phone started buzzing. One, two, three, four, five.... ten... twenty messages. He had to look. Almost smiled when he read all of them but caught himself before that smile reached from ear to ear. He started a trend.

Long Live King James made up all twenty messages.

Great, he just made James a martyr. He wanted to laugh.

“Another coffee?”

Tyler didn't notice the waitress standing over him until he heard her speak. He looked up from his phone and one of those sunbeams found an opening through the side of his sunglasses. Perfect timing, too. Tyler's eyes were sensitive to the sun, very sensitive indeed. Felt his eye tear up instantly. Normally he would wipe it clean before anyone saw, but, considering the circumstance, he allowed it to fall. Looked like he was crying.

“You ok?” said the waitress, a blonde-haired blue-eyed beauty more than likely working coffee shops while attending one of the nearby colleges.

Tyler cleared his throat. “My friend died this morning,” he said, then pretended to suck back his tears. Lips quivered for effect.

“So sorry.” Tyler waited for her to say something else, the pause and silence were irritating. “Are you hungry? Let me know what you want. Anything at all. On the house.”

“I appreciate it, but no, thank you. I just want to be alone for now.”

She forced a sympathetic smile. “Ok,” she said, “If you change your mind, just let me know.”

“Thank you.”

And she walked away, attending to her tables. Tyler watched her, thinking about that night from a month ago and how the waitress resembled the girl James had in his bedroom.

He was a rapist too that James Reilly. No still means no the last time Tyler checked. From bully to drug dealer to rapist, that was James Reilly's progression. The same James Reilly who now materialized inside of the sunlight, beaming through the window sitting across the table from Tyler. Tyler had watched the waitress return to the counter and low and behold, when his vision returned to the sunbeams, James was there. He looked nothing like what Tyler imagined the dead should look. In the sunlight, James appeared almost angelic, sunlight glimmering off the outline of his body. One exception though, his eyeballs were black.

“Death,” said James. “It's not so bad.”

Tyler noticed then that his mouth was open and made a conscious effort to close it. He snapped his eyes off James, turned his head, looking at the other patrons. Can they see James too?

Reilly shook his head. “They can't see me. Just you.”

Tyler locked eyes with James. Noticed there was a wide and round bloodstain on his shirt where Tyler had shot him.

And James smiled. "Pam too, huh? That was a revelation I did not expect."

Tyler crept his sunglasses from his nose to his head. James remained in Tyler's field of vision, looked like he was made from sunbeams, sparkling with a heavy golden glow.

"Surprised I see," said James, a strange grin plastered across his mouth. "Guess I'm locked in on you now." His brow curled, inquisitive. "At least for a while, I guess."

Tyler moved his head back and forth. "Why?" He had to force the question over his lips from his closing throat.

James bobbed to his left, then his right. "Seems that's how this works. I don't know much, but what I've learned so far is that when someone saves your soul, you owe them a debt. Like karma."

"Saved your soul?"

James huffed and grinned. "Crazy right? Yeah, that you did. If I kept going the way I was, yeah..." He stopped speaking, looked out the window, then back to Tyler. "I saw what I would have become. How corrupt and dark. I was already there, already on the path to hell, but you made that right. Gave me a chance for redemption." James rolled his eyes. "Can't believe that's what my parents are doing. It's a sick, sick world, and I was knee deep in it and falling fast. I would have traded my soul for a blow job from Johansen if that option were on the table."

"Doing what?" asked Tyler.

James froze then, those black eyes unmoving and Tyler felt himself cringe, bones stiff, retreating as if he could retreat. James rolled his tongue inside his cheek, turned those eyes to the floor, sat forward, then returned said eyes to Tyler.

"Amazing really. I actually feel bad for you. For what you're about to go through, that is." He craned his head to the right, staring as if he could see inside Tyler's mind. "Certain events that we endure... we don't understand why we go through them when they happen. Not until much later, when reflecting, can we see what the purpose was." He nodded. "You can't kill someone and not expect that energy to come and find you, Tyler. And it is coming, believe you and me. It is coming. And that right soon."

"What is? What's coming?"

James simply smiled at Tyler's question.

"What's coming?" Tyler's voice raised.

Those sunbeams shifted then, and with the shift, James sparkled.

Tyler jumped off his seat. "I said, *what is coming?*" He said this loud too. Not to mention his seat screeched across the linoleum floor and smacked against the wall behind him.

Everyone in the café stopped to look at him. James was gone too. Tyler looked over the café. His body stiff. They all had black eyeballs. Tyler grabbed his phone and made a beeline for the door, barreling onto the sidewalk and rushed through the late afternoon crowd.

James' voice in the back of his mind,

"Tell Pam I said hello."

7:00 PM
 Westchester County, NY
 Carnival of Chaos
 Jigglyspot

Jiggly knew SAC Mills very well. Had known him for the better part of two decades. Not that Mills would recollect any of it, but Jiggly found it humorous the FBI agent had tracked him down, aided by Helmsley no doubt, which Jiggly found a bit skeptical, considering Helmsley was a CIA agent planted by Jiggly's people. Maybe Mills was getting too close to the truth? But considering current circumstance, Jiggly was well aware he could use this event to his benefit. Nevertheless, Jigglyspot prepared himself for a brief, albeit intense, conversation. Plus, he was still beaming high from the extraction. Glowing, in fact, was Jigglyspot.

He met with the detectives outside the doublewide, introduced himself and offered a secluded spot in a trailer courtesy of Hal who, after informing Jiggly that an FBI and a CIA agent wanted to speak with him, had warned Jiggly when he said, "Don't bring any shit into my carnival. I've got enough to deal with." Hal being a sixty-seven-year-old male who hailed from Alabama, still talked with that thick southern drawl, and no matter what time of day or year wore the same clothes with the same stains that seemed to take on a life of their own. And he always stank like some putrid body odor Jiggly found rather offensive in every way imaginable. If the SHS had a president, Hal would make a strong candidate for the position. Strongman Kipp could be his running mate, considering stank and lack of soap and water was a requirement.

"Have a seat," offered Jiggly, gesturing to the folding table disguised as a kitchen table where two folding chairs waited for the officers. Jiggly took a third folding chair from in between the refrigerator and the wall, set it up by the table and sat. Jiggly had to force his eyes away from Mills. Jiggly tried to recount how many nights he had spent with SAC Mills over the last two decades? Had to be close to ten. Good times, Jiggly thought. Good times indeed. Jiggly was fond of the detective's soon to be ex-wife. Lorraine kept in shape, which made those nights so much more entertaining. Jiggly could see her now, her image hovering over Mills' head as he eyeballed Jiggly from across the folding table.

"Do I know you, Mr. Worthington?" asked Mills and Jiggly had to catch and hold on to the chuckle that erupted in the back of his throat.

Jiggly sat back in his chair; put on his best *I'm a happy clown* face and looked at the detective with a soft innocent stare. "Not that I know," he said. "Have you been to many carnivals recently?"

Mills, it seemed to Jiggly, had to force his eyes away. He turned to Helmsley when he said, "Not recently, no," then asked Helmsley to take the first question.

Helmsley took a small notepad from his shirt pocket, pen included. "May we ask your whereabouts yesterday until nine am this morning?"

"Of course," said Jiggly, noticing the detective's noses kept scrunching and whiffing. "Sorry for the smell, detectives. This is Hal's trailer and, as you can tell with Hal, soap and water are not high on his priority list. If cleanliness is next to Godliness than Hal is so deep into hell, he can't see straight."

Helmsley allowed his laughter to escape. Mills sat stone faced as if struggling to recollect. Jiggly knew what it was, where had he seen Jiggly before, but that thought would never come to fruition. Not unless he drank from the fruit of extraction.

"To answer your question, detective," said Jiggly, being sure to look up and to his right, a telltale sign of recollection. "Yesterday I came here around four in the afternoon. I worked at the haunted house. We close on Thursdays at ten pm and after that there's always a party. So..." Again he turned his eyes up and to the right. "I left around midnight, took a nightcap in my trailer, watched some news and drifted off to sleep. Woke up around eight this morning."

"Trailer? Do you share your trailer with anyone?" Mills this time, his hands on the table.

"More than a few people. The regulars, as we call ourselves, move from town to town with the carnival. We always pick up a few locals to help when we get into town, but, mostly, it's just us." He sat up with a slight bounce. "Tight knit family, we all are. Been together for a long time too. Some more than others, like myself. This is my home, my family and friends. Hal is like a father. Sure, he's rough around the edges, but he always looks out for me. For all of us. He's a good man."

"Noted," said Helmsley. "So, who shared the trailer last night?"

"People come in and out all night. Who was there when I woke up? Let's see, Kipp the strongman, Jasmine and her son, I believe you met the boy already. Freda, Jimboy. He works the sausage and peppers stand. Great cook too. You should get yourself some of that before you leave." Jiggly smiled from ear to ear. Felt his clown makeup crack.

"Anyone else?" said Mills.

"Not to my recollection. But like I said, people are coming in and out all night." Jiggly narrowed his eyes. "What is this about, anyway?"

Helmsley shook his head. "We can't comment on an open investigation."

"Oh," said Jiggly and shrugged. He looked at Mills, whose eyes seemed as stiff as a board. Mills seemed so lost, Jiggly almost felt sorry for him.

Helmsley broke the silence. "I'm sure the people you mentioned will verify what you told us?"

Jiggly turned to Helmsley. "Of course." Helmsley wrote in his notebook. Jiggly didn't like him, not one bit. The man was too stiff and-quite obvious to Jiggly-had less than half a brain. "Anything else, detective? I do have a job to do."

It was Mills who answered. "Do you mind taking off the clown nose?"

Jiggly pinched his eyebrows; face scrunched, then lifted his head and smiled an ear-to-ear smile, loving that the detectives were staring at his yellow, rotted teeth. "Strange, but, of course." Jiggly whisked his clown nose away as if he were entertaining a crowd with a big reveal. He posed for the detectives like a nose model in full bloom. Turned left, then right. Noticed how both detectives took a long, hard look at his perfectly smooth

nose. Extraction reverses the aging process. His gin blossoms were gone, at least until the extraction effect waned.

The detectives shrunk in their seats, disappointed. Jiggly pressed his clown nose back onto his nose. Fixed his favorite tiny top hat by shifting the piece of plastic to the right side of his head, covering the white spot.

“Anything more, detectives? This has certainly been an entertaining, albeit odd, occurrence, but I do have to return to my post. Can’t leave the kiddies waiting now, can we?”

Mills sat still, exploring Jigglyspot. Attempting to recollect, Jiggly was sure. Helmsley answered with the typical, informing Jiggly they’d speak with his coworkers to verify his story. Jiggly escorted them to the door, offered them best wishes and good luck with their investigation, then closed the door. He leaned against the same door, thinking.

His face scrunched in contemplation. He turned to the window and watched the detectives. Hands clenched into fists. Jiggly thought about the time. Soon, the sun will be gone and something had to be done about SAC Mills. Jiggly didn’t mind a loose end here and there, but being questioned by the FBI was not one of them. It brought unwanted attention. And what’s up with Helmsley? That son of a bitch. Jiggly had said to send someone with more than half a brain. Helmsley obviously did not match the profile considering he brought Mills right into Jiggly’s humble abode. So Jiggly thought and then thought some more about Helmsley. Perhaps there was more to the agent than Jiggly suspected? After all, everyone can serve a purpose, even if they have half a brain. And why not, Jiggly thought. Helmsley can serve a purpose too. What beautiful fun Jiggly could have with that one.

Jiggly watched as the two detectives trifled over to the doublewide. *Good luck detectives, the carnival is in full bloom and all have taken their positions.* Then a thought occurred. Westchester. The Hudson Valley. And by the time the good detectives finish their inquiries, night will have fallen.

Jiggly chuckled at his thought. Started whistling and bobbed over to the refrigerator, thirsty as all bloody hell. The stench in the trailer was nothing compared to the rotting flesh, bones and blood that greeted Jiggly like a tidal wave when he opened the refrigerator. A decapitated head in a mason jar of solvent, one eye closed, the other a faded blue. A rat squeaked and ran across the shelf and jumped into the trailer. A second mason jar on the bottom shelf, no head, though. In this Mason jar was an abortion, eyes closed. Next to the abortion, a third, although smaller Mason jar capped at the top, filled with blood. Jiggly took the blood filled mason jar, twisted the cap, then took a long gulp, being careful not to spill a drop.

He burped, then shivered. Replaced the jar, and walked to the window. No detectives. No sign of anyone. Jiggly closed his eyes. It was time to send the necessary information to the people who could implement. Felt his eyeballs move to the back of his skull, eyelids fluttering. Mills’ face, Helmsley’s too and let’s not forget Mills’ wife Lorraine, she was sure as anything a firecracker delight. Jiggly’s people will thank him for the sweet Lorraine.

His eyes shot open and Jiggly took a deep breath while looking over the trailer. Jiggly was feeling ecstatic; he made a mental note to be on the lookout for someone

special tonight. After nightfall, Jiggly was sure they would arrive. And more than likely around the same time Mills and Helmsley are introduced to a newfound curiosity.

6:00 PM
Los Angeles, CA
Lilly

Lilly checked her phone for the billionth time, huddled on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, sitting cross-legged with a drink wedged between her legs, television on mute, and the boys upstairs. She'd ordered pizza and let the boys eat in their rooms. She wanted to be alone. Alone in waiting, on the couch and watching, watching for Tad's car to come roaring up the driveway. Still no return calls or text messages from Tad. Lilly passed acute anxiety a few hours ago, and was on the verge of contacting law enforcement. Tad always replied or returned her call, sure sometimes his response arrived a few hours later, but this was going on six hours and because of the extremity of Lilly's last message, Tad should have responded by now.

Issues. He said he had to deal with a few issues.

And the vodka wasn't helping. Lilly's mind kept rolling with sinister thoughts and the anxiety kept circling, spiraling, and raising her blood pressure, her head feeling like a hot balloon. She was drinking to relieve anxiety, but the effect was the exact opposite. Her hands were shaking, and she'd been crying for the last half hour. Slow streaming tears that fell silently without the help of whines, cries or wails as if the tears arrived without conscious knowledge. Frankly speaking, she felt a type of fear she'd never experienced before. After fifteen years of marriage, she never had a doubt about Tad.

Except over the last month. Lilly noticed the change, however slight it had been. Tad was never someone who yelled at the boys and never lost his temper; he was calm, understanding and possessed an uncanny knack to discover the heart inside the concern. Nonetheless, a month ago, he lost his temper over something trivial. The boys were arguing, as siblings often do, and he lost it. Cursed and threw that damn gaming system across the room. Said gaming system being the cause behind the argument.

"I don't slave all day so you two can act like fucking animals."

A loud crash and bang followed Tad's words. Loud crash and bang being the gaming system slamming into the wall with irreparable damage followed by Tad's retreat to his bedroom.

He wasn't the same since that day. Nor was Christopher.

Unhinged. That was the word Lilly used to describe Tad's state of mind. "You're becoming unhinged. What is wrong?"

To which Tad put his head in his hands and said, "Nothing," in a dire and defeated voice.

Lilly let it lie. Now she wished she hadn't. Tad's retreat continued to spiral after the gaming incident. He seemed detached, as if he wanted nothing to do with them. As if he

blamed them for existing. And now this, today's events unfolding like they did and Tad's non-response.

Was Chris acting out to earn his father's attention? Definitely possible. Tad barely looked at him anymore. When he was home, that is. He'd been working late every night, weekends too, and he always slept through the alarm. Slept through the hustle and bustle of morning activity. There was one morning when Lilly thought he was pretending to sleep. She let that go too, but she couldn't let go of the feeling, emotion, and sense of dread that something was wrong. It didn't take a rocket scientist to confirm that truth.

Lilly finished her vodka, and peeled herself off the couch then went to the kitchen, half stumbling, half shuffling. Wiped the tears from her face. He's cheating, she thought. Has to be. There's no other explanation. Maybe it's that new intern, you know, the one with the pretty green eyes and youthful body. Smart too, Lilly knew. Lilly could see the girl's face when she opened the freezer door. Vodka bottle had one drink left. She emptied the bottle into her glass.

What is her name?

Lilly couldn't remember, as if the name retreated from memory like a child hides from a violent parent. She sucked back tears through a hoarse throat. Screwed on the bottle cap and dropped the empty bottle in the garbage. Looked out the window where the sun now hovered above the horizon.

What the fuck is her name?

She sipped her drink and felt her head spin.

Her phone buzzed in her hand. It was Tad. The message read:

Busy day. Sorry for the silence. Be home soon. I love you. Tell the boys I love them.

Lilly smashed her phone on the kitchen counter. One, two, three times. Crack, smash, total desolation then tossed it across the room. Downed her drink and when she stretched her eyelids, a rush of warm intoxication flooded her brain, her head feeling like a balloon, lightheaded and weary, the room with a slight tilt and spinning. Wet eyes drooping with intoxication. She walked to the stairs and looked up. They seemed to stretch on for miles, more like a mountain than a staircase. Her head drifted. She went to her home office, dropped on the couch, and fell asleep.

Passed out is more like it.

6:30 PM
Hollywood, CA
Cassandra

What she didn't want was to get caught looking through Ira's files. Good thing for Cassandra, the office should be empty, considering the time. Most everyone left the office by three on Fridays, either to take out a client or start the weekend early. During the drive to the office, Cassandra kept repeating her reason for being at the office, just in case she was caught, reciting said reason so the words would flow naturally and not seem forced or caught in the throat, as lies often are.

"Just getting a jump on next week," she said in a soft tone, edging her car into a parking spot outside the office, then pushed the gearshift into park, and detached her seatbelt. "Making a list of loose ends for Monday morning. I want the party to end without a hitch." She forced a smile. Practice, just in case. Always best to lead and end with a smile. Cassandra gripped the steering wheel, looking over the office while chewing her bottom lip. The office was too dark to see inside. The building featured blacked-out windows because every afternoon around three pm the sun would beam through the west-facing windows and heat the office like a pot of water on a hot stove. And no one in this town liked to sweat. Never let them see you sweat, became the agency's motto over the years. But with the sun still beaming over the state of California, Cassandra couldn't see shit beyond the blacked-out windows.

Anyone could be in there.

Maybe I should come back after dark. I'll be able to see if a light is on in the office and know if someone's in there.

But that would be even more suspicious. Coming back now is one thing. Coming back after dark on a Friday night is highly unbelievable. And if Ira's in there at that time...

She let the thought drift. Her stomach gurgled, souring from the fourth glass of wine she had at lunch with Sharon. She shook her head, shaking the thought from memory. Plus, she knew Ira's schedule. He should be eating dinner with his client at this very moment. Now was as good a time as any. She cut the engine and got out of the car. Noticed her hands were shaking.

Get it together, Cassandra. Get it together. All you're doing is helping a friend. That's how stars are made. You've got to know someone who knows someone. Plus, if this does work, Sharon will owe Cassandra a favor, one she would no doubt call in when the time was right. Whether or not Sharon was successful after this didn't matter. Cassandra was certain that asshole Kevin Johnson was on his way up which meant that Kevin was on the hook for a starlight tabloid romance with the lead actress being Sharon. Famous for being famous type of thing. Should that be the case, Cassandra would have to call in said

favor as quickly as possible. Capitalize on the moment and catapult her career through the roof.

She unlocked the door, then looked over both shoulders and cursed herself for not checking the back parking lot. Forget it, it'll be fine. She slipped through the door; the alarm beeping down the time. Entered the code: 0621, which she realized was the date of the party the agency was funding. The party she was using as an excuse to be in the office.

The alarm clicked off, and Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. The set alarm meant the office was barren. The last person to leave was responsible for setting the alarm. She looked through the windows, scanning the street. Felt her face flush with heat, listening to her own shallow breathing. No one on the street. She turned around, pulled off her suit jacket while stomping towards her desk, dropped the jacket on her chair, and pushed through the door to the main office.

She knew exactly where she'd left the latest file, on Ira's desk when she was in his office this morning, and she hoped it was still there. Cassandra knew Ira like a book. After a hard climax on cocaine, he didn't do too much other than more cocaine, needing to rev up his engine once again, get the tank full and jump back into the rat race. She hoped that was exactly the case this time out. Her current task would go smoothly if it were.

Cassandra made a beeline towards Ira's office, past the rows of cubicles on her left, and the closed-door offices on her right. Ira's was the last office at the end of the hall. She recanted what she had to do. Sharon's headshot and resume were in Ira's office, in the filing cabinet behind his locked closet door. Cassandra had included Sharon's information a few months ago for a minor role in a teen drama for a small, however, up-and-coming network. Sharon was not included on the agency's list of potential candidates, although her headshot and resume were kept for future use. All Cassandra had to do was slip Sharon's headshot in the folder she left on Ira's desk. A folder with headshots and resumes for the top three candidates for a new major role.

But Ira's office was locked.

Should've thought about that. Now what?

Grab the key to the storage room where a locked box contained keys to all offices. Cassandra shook her head, turned around, and stomped across the office to her desk.

The things you do for friends.

7:00 PM

Hollywood, California

Sharon

She arrived at the restaurant early, not too early, about ten minutes, and ordered a glass of wine. Her eyes lit up when she saw Kevin stroll into the restaurant like he owned the place. Felt her smile turn to a jealous frown when Kevin made small talk with the hostess who laughed at whatever he said, her eyes shied away a moment later and Kevin ran his hands through his thick black hair, his green eyes seemed to shimmer and sparkle, made even brighter with his wide smile and perfect teeth.

Those emerald eyes found Sharon and Kevin said something to the hostess, who turned and met Sharon's stare from over her shoulder. Now the hostess' smile turned to a frown, her stare betraying what Sharon believed were daggers behind those eyes, sizing up Sharon with little effort. Kevin walked to the table, but Sharon maintained her gaze on the hostess. She felt her heart thump in her chest, her blood curl and her bones tense. Moved her head back and forth and felt her lips curl into a loathsome grin.

"Don't look so jealous," said Kevin. He leaned in and kissed her, then took his seat.

Sharon's lips were stiff with that kiss. The hostess took another glance over her shoulder and Sharon turned her stiff lips into a wide smile, then turned to Kevin.

"Don't trust a woman, either. When they all got their eye on you, there's no telling how far they'll go." Her voice trailed off, hung over their heads, and dissipated.

Kevin cleared his throat and took up his menu, started looking it over. It was obvious he enjoyed the attention. Might as well get used to it. This event was just the beginning and with Kevin's star on the rise, such occurrences will become a daily battle. Sharon sipped her wine, staring at Kevin. He seemed different. There was something about his eyes she couldn't put a finger on. And the way he sat, his demeanor and body language, screamed there was something out of place, some energy that hadn't been there before, as if he were chiseled from stone. Cold and calculated. Calm and arrogant.

Kevin ordered a martini. Sharon another wine. He made small talk with the waitress—another woman who Sharon knew was undressing him with her eyes. Sharon had to inform said waitress she wanted another glass of wine. If she hadn't, Sharon knew the waitress would have moved away from the table as if Sharon were invisible. Kevin seemed untouchable, larger and taller than she had remembered, with an invisible wall surrounding him. A wall Sharon could not penetrate. His demeanor was steady, unwavering, and constant.

The silence between them was maddening. She felt mesmerized. All she could do was stare. Something had indeed changed. Kevin put his menu on the table and looked over the restaurant, scanning every table in quiet solitude. Sharon believed he was ignoring her existence, avoiding any and all questions that may be on her mind. She felt a

lump build in her throat, felt her bottom lip quiver. Kevin's eyes roaming, and Sharon cleared her throat.

“So, what's this big news?”

Now his eyes snapped to her, and when their eyes met, a shiver ran through Sharon. Felt herself cringe as if she were shrinking into her chair. He quickly turned away, severed the connection as if he knew what she had seen: the change in his eyes. Kevin didn't look at Sharon with a loving, adoring stare that conjured passion from his soul to his eyes. No, he looked at Sharon as if she were yesterday's dinner.

His grin curled his lips to his ears. Seemed like he was about to laugh. “I'll tell you later. For now, I just want to eat. I'm absolutely famished.”

*10:00 PM
Hudson Valley, NY
SAC Mills*

“It’s still strange,” said Mills, sitting shotgun while Helmsley drove across the winding Taconic Parkway. “The entire time we were with him, I had a sense of déjà vu.”

Helmsley was quiet, kept his eyes on the road and grabbed his coffee from the cup holder. Mills turned his gaze to the side of the road, trees cutting across his vision as the car moved forward. The waxing crescent moon hung overhead like an Arabian night. The North Star glimmering to the right of the moon. Mostly clear skies with a few rolling, however sporadic clouds.

“It can’t be him, unless he received a ton of plastic surgery to cover up his gin blossoms and he doesn’t seem like he can afford such a surgery, not to mention that would have had to have happened sometime today. You saw his nose it was as smooth as a baby’s butt. There’s no way he’s our guy.”

Mills cracked his fingers, one at a time. The fact that Jiggly’s nose was as smooth as a baby’s butt was indeed strange. When Mills first laid eyes on Jiggly, his stomach clicked; a gut instinct that confirmed Jiggly was the mop bucket killer. The sensation was a combination of relief and shame, knowing that after twenty years the person he’d been searching for all this time was a five-foot tall carnival clown. Not a circus clown, mind you, but one of those carnival sideshows, a freak for all intents and purposes. And the man, this suspect, Mills knew, recognized Mills the moment he saw him. It was like reuniting with an old friend, someone you haven’t seen since high school. Mills was embarrassed by the small smile that curled across his lips when he first saw Jiggly. He hoped Helmsley did not notice. Hoped he didn’t notice the haze either. From the moment he saw Jiggly Mills felt like he was in a trance, struggling to speak, respond, and ask questions. Felt like he wasn’t in the trailer when they questioned Jiggly. No, those walls seemed to disappear, transporting Mills into a nest of clouds. Perhaps, Mills thought, to allow his thoughts to process, searching, seeking to find the thought hidden behind a host of thoughts, because something sinister existed beneath the folds. A memory long gone, driven so deep into the subconscious the only way to reach it was through death. Or, perhaps, torture.

“Need to take a piss,” said Helmsley.

Mills turned to him and gave a quick nod, as if he had to acknowledge the fact that Helmsley needed to relieve himself, then returned to his thoughts as the car veered off the Parkway, swallowed by darkness. There were no streetlights to illuminate the path. No cars passing by with headlights to prove the existence of other human beings. The car stopped at a stop sign and Helmsley took a right. Nothing but trees on both sides of the road. Quiet. Mills rolled down his window, and closed his eyes when that fresh crisp air

graced his skin. So quiet was the night, Mills was sure something sinister existed in the silence.

Helmsley turned left. The back tires caught a hump in the road and thumped. Mills looked around. There was nothing to see. Neither gas station nor convenience store. Only darkness bathed in a sliver of moonlight and stars. Helmsley pulled over.

“Here?” said Mills.

“Yeah. Nature calls and well...” Helmsley turned right, then left and shrugged. “All I see is nature.”

Mills rolled his eyes as Helmsley got out of the car. Watched him walk to the side of the road, headlights beaming, bathing Helmsley in light.

When Mills looked up, his eyes narrowed, mouth slightly agape. He leaned in closer to the windshield, trying to wrap his head around what he was looking at. There was something in the trees overhead. Looked like a disc hovering in the night sky. And it was spinning. Spinning and moving, moving over treetops. He went to speak, to call for Helmsley, but no words came. His thought was simple, *Helmsley get in the car... now*. His heart raced, breath constricted yet huffing, but his thought refused to bounce off his lips as if some unseen force restricted his vocal cords.

Bright lights now. Light everywhere, beaming through the windshield. He lost sight of the spinning disc but he knew, somehow he knew, the disc was above the car. Understood the light came from this ship. Saw Helmsley, both arms arched over his groin, his head stretched, staring at the light. The car bumped and rocked, but Mills remained still, unmoving. Either he didn't want to move, paralyzed with fear, or he couldn't move, some invisible force wrapped around him, constricting all muscle movement. Mills felt his words in his throat. His stomach jutted in and out. Realized his breathing was the same. Trying to talk. To scream and holler for Helmsley to get back in the car. Watched as Helmsley was lifted off the street and disappeared into the light. Felt the car rock again, then constrict as if an invisible massive hand wrapped around the car and squeezed.

The thought never occurred to jump out of the car. Jump out and run. A flood of memories wafted before him. Twenty years of memories. Jigglyspot with a smile leaning on a red cane. In his bedroom, his wife lying next to him on their bed. Unable to move, some invisible force wrapped around his throat, restricting all movement. Could hear his wife panting. He knew those noises that erupted in her throat. Heard the grunts, manly animalistic grunts, his wife's orgasm about to bellow into the night. And in the corner of his eye, he could see the beast on top of his wife. Red eyes watching him as its tongue lapped across her throat.

And then Mills was inside the car. And the car moved. Not forward or backward. The car lifted off the street.

Lifted off the ground and into the light.