

Hath No Fury

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Acknowledgements

This story was originally written on reddit for a writing prompt titled, “During a bank robbery you're surprised when the criminals seem to recognize you and retreat in fear. Only later do you learn that your high school sweet-heart now runs a global crime syndicate and has you placed on a ‘No Harm’ list. You decide to pay them a visit after all these years.”

I had been writing under various online pseudonyms for years, never very confident in my writing abilities, writing mostly for fun. The overwhelmingly positive response I received from this story has convinced me to continue writing and I am thankful for all the support I've received, namely to the random redditors who commented on my story every week, my family who helped me brainstorm ideas for the storyline, and whoever is reading this right now.

Prologue

I remember the bead of sweat drip down my brow as I knelt in front of the bank robber, my hands on my head, an extremely vulnerable position. He fumbled with my wallet as he tried to pull out my ID, his panicked expression visible through the strange looking ski mask.

"Oh shit oh shit-"

"What is it? Calm the hell down T."

"It's him, it-it's Warren!"

"No it can't-, what? THE Warren?"

"Yes THE Warren, we're sorry sir. We didn't know you were in here!" the shaking man in the ski mask told me.

"Honest mistake sir," the other bank robber yelled as he grabbed the half-filled sack of valuables off the counter and ran towards the door, "have a nice day!"

I'd not understood then. But it would justify a lot of events that had been happening in the past few years. Small subtle things like preferential treatment at a coffee place or how my friends kept telling me how lucky I was that I would always get the first job offer or apartment I applied for. I'd always chalked it up to good fortune, 'the man above looking out for me' my friends would joke. But this event. The robber calling me "THE Warren", meant that, to their group or at least to someone, I was important. Important enough for bank robbers to run out of a building in fear.

And as I stood among the dressed in black, each man and woman walked past me with grieving faces. They told me how much my mother meant to them and how sorry they were. They each shared a happy moment for me to hold onto, to think about the better times. Despite the stories, I sat there. Watching the grave digger shovel more and more dirt onto her coffin. Soon there was no-one left but myself and the digger.

I broke down into tears, sobbing into my palms like a little boy. I wailed and wailed thinking about all the moments I had with her, and all the moments I wouldn't. I heaved with each cry and let out what I had tried so strongly to hold in. To give the appearance of strength. But I was weak. I was helpless. I let her die. I should've pushed harder. You see she didn't die of old age. She didn't die in a tragic car accident. She died of Methemoglobinemia. A chemical called Aniline seeping into the water pipes from a nearby factory repeatedly poisoned my mother for years.

"I'm sorry," a voice said calmly behind me. I was startled and released my sticky hands from my face. The gravedigger was gone, the grave still only half full. I tried to recompose myself before turning around to face the voice. But when I turned, I saw her. Ira. The girl I once loved. Once. We had split up right before college in a less-than-friendly fashion. I don't even remember what the fight was about, but she had struck me. It didn't really hurt physically, and I tried to assure her that I could forgive it, but she was distraught. She said nobody had ever made her feel that way and left.

But there she stood, looking the way she did the day we split up. I sat there motionless, the scent of freshly dug soil lingering in the air. She turned and walked away. And I didn't follow.

After a few days, I wasn't even sure it happened. Perhaps it was just a stress-induced imagination? But she stayed in my mind, with every lucky green traffic light to fortunate parking space. Every fast download, she came into my mind. Admittedly it was a strange leap of logic. But two strange things had occurred within such a short time frame and it was inevitable that my brain would try to link the two. Was she involved with that bank robbery? Was she the reason I was called "THE Warren"?

I was bent over my desk, paper scattered across the surface. Like a full-blown conspiracy theorist, I had strings connecting pages and photographs stuck on a cork board, trying to link all the people that held back the regulations to make the water safe. I had most of the links, but it was overwhelming me. There were so many people involved, from government officials to safety inspectors. All of them in on it in some way. In this moment my mother would've come in with a glass of tea, patting me on the shoulder to tell me that I shouldn't work so hard. That I would work myself into an early grave. But her ghost faded away as I yearned for that pat on the shoulder. I looked up to the board in anger and saw the photos of the men and women who denied me the rest of her life.

I screamed. I screamed to release the frustration, I screamed and wished that they could hear my pain. I screamed and screamed only to be interrupted by a knock on my door. Looking through the peephole, I saw "Joe's Pizza Palace" written on the teenager's hat.

"I have a delivery for a Mr. Warren?" the pizza boy yelled from the other side of the door before giving it another knock. I opened the door.

"Ah Warren right?" he asked, handing me the pizza.

"I didn't order a pizza?" I mentioned, still taking the pizza in hand because it was a pizza and I wasn't going to say no.

"It says right here, Warren, 25 Clay Street, pepperoni and pineapples with extra pineapples," he said, pointing at the receipt, "I won't judge you for the pineapples, everyone has their dirty little secret. Have a nice day!" the boy said with a smile before turning and walking away.

"W-Wait, I haven't paid for this yet," I yelled across my front yard.

"Um," the boy looked back down at the receipt, "No it says here that you paid online already," he yelled back as he reached his car door, the "Joe's Pizza Palace" car topper blocking his face. He paused and leaned to the side looking at me again past the topper. "Or at least, somebody did," he mentioned with an innocent smile before getting in the car and driving away.

Pepperoni and pineapples were my favorite.

I walked back into my living room and placed the pizza down, opening the box expecting a message written inside. Of course, there was none. Why would there be? I took a slice and walked up to the corkboard of faces. I stood there chewing, trying to think of my approach tomorrow. I had planned to go to the zoning official's office and get some answers. I had a rough plan about how I was going to get in front of the man but it was still rough.

Looking back down at the pizza, I tried to shake it off as crazy. But the feeling was there, and any idiot could see the connections. But it was crazy.

"Tomorrow," I yelled to nobody in the room, "I am going to the zoning official's board to speak to Harold Weinbrecht about the unattended seeping of Aniline into the water supply system." And of course, nobody replied.

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The morning was cold and crisp. My lips were cracked from the dryness of the air and the scarf draped across my face wasn't helping. I reached the zoning office first thing in the morning and was greeted with a long line at the security check. Metal detectors and x-ray scanners separated everyone from the rest of the office and at the pace everything was moving, it was probably going to take an hour before I would get in.

"He's with me," a man in a business suit told the security guard as he waved a card in the guard's face and pointed at me. The guard escorted me out of the line and bypassed the security check entirely. I was confused and turned to thank the man, but he didn't even come through the gate himself, simply turning and leaving the same way he came. Puzzled but determined, I continued down the hall and stopped at an intersection of signs. There were over a dozen signs pointing in different directions for this and that office.

"That way young man," a raspy voice said from my side. I turned to see an elderly woman with a warm smile pointing to my left.

"Oh, I'm here to see the-"

"Yes yes, it is that way," she reconfirmed with a smile.

"Thanks..." I stuttered out before she turned and started helping other people. I walked down the corridor and sure enough, "ZONING BOARD" was written on the doors in bold letters. I entered and found a door titled "Mr. Weinbrecht's Office" written on one of those sliding black name placards that you would normally find on a school principal's office. As I was about to enter the door, a man in an extremely well fitted suit pushed past me and walked straight in. He didn't look older than 25 and as I followed him into the room, he walked straight for the secretary.

"Hey there, you're Ms. Potter, right?" he asked, leaning over her desk.

"Uh, why yes, how can I help you?" she replied, clearly flustered by the man's good looks.

"I'm sorry, where are my manners, I'm Adam, I'm a huge fan of your work."

"My work?"

"Yes, at the Parkview gallery, your art is absolutely gorgeous," he mentioned so casually. Even I stood still, infatuated with how smooth he was.

"Oh my, I well, it's nothing really just a hobby," she replied with a tinge of a southern bell accent. She had broken all eye contact at this point, her cheeks flushed red.

"Your piece titled just 'Flower vase' really spoke to me! I thought the contrast of colours were delightful. Kinda like how you are Ms. Potter, if you don't mind me sayin'," he said with another smile. He turned to me and subtly motioned for me to move past them.

"Oh my gosh haha," the secretary swooned as Adam pulled at her chin to focus on him and not me.

"Let me tell you-" his voice trailed off as I walked into the director's office. The large man behind the desk looked up from his desk and adjusted his spectacles trying to identify me. His face looked exactly the same as the photo I had pinned up on my cork board.

"Yes? Who are you?"

"Mr. Weinbrecht, my name is Mr. Warren, I am here to talk about zoning area R3."

"Well this is unprecedented," he huffed. "You're lucky the appointment I was going to have was cancelled this morning. You may approach me," he motioned towards his desk as his head turned back towards his papers. He stunk of evil and I didn't care if that was just my already negative bias of the man. I began explaining to him how Aniline was seeping into the water for the entire district and that lack of safety regulations led to my mother's death. The heavy-set man huffed and puffed at the end of every sentence and looked dismissive.

"Do you have any evidence that this chemical came from the factory?"

"Well the chemical Aniline is used in rubber processing and the factory is a rubber-"

"So, you have circumstantial evidence then," the man dismissed. Turning his head back to his papers. "You may leave."

I sat there dumbfounded, a rage boiling inside me. It wasn't hard to see how this man helped kill my mother. It wasn't hard to see how this man didn't even care.

"Thank you for your time Mr. Weinbrecht," I said as I got up to leave. The man replied with a yet another huff. As I walked out of his office, I saw the secretary still engaged in conversation with the young man. I looked him in the eye, anger written all over my face. He returned my stare and subtly looked back at Weinbrecht's office before looking back at me. I nodded. He nodded back and returned to his conversation with the fawning secretary.

Two days later Weinbrecht's office declared that they would begin a full investigation into the poisoning of the water supply by the chemical Aniline. Three days after that, Weinbrecht was stabbed over 40 times. The media claimed it was a home invasion gone wrong.

I returned to my cork board and pulled Weinbrecht's photo off the wall. I took a step back and took in the whole board again. There were still so many faces left. And my anger was not sated. I would have my revenge, and Ira would be my wrath.

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## Chapter One

A man died because I nodded. A part of my brain was still telling me that this was all my imagination, that all of this was pure coincidence because the alternative was pure insanity. The alternative was that some organisation was secretly helping me all the way up to carrying out an assassination. And somehow, in some shape or form, my ex-girlfriend was involved. My fondness for pepperoni and extra pineapples was only known by two people. My mother. And Ira. And only one of the two were still alive.

I looked back at my cork board. A few strings and arrows pointing at an empty spot where Harold Weinbrecht once sat. With an investigation now officially beginning, I would have to begin planning around it. Not only did I want to help the investigation, but I had to make sure that the same people responsible for the leak weren't in any way in charge of it.

I looked up the names of the people in the investigatory board and saw Harold Weinbrecht's name still on the list. I stifled a grin. It seemed like whoever was maintaining the list hadn't read the news recently.

Alongside him were a few names that I didn't recognise, save for one. Clarice Smith. Referencing back to my cork board, I saw her face smiling proudly back at me. Clarice was the liaison between the zoning board and corporations. She would've been in charge of handling all communications between Indar Rubber, the rubber factory that was seeping Aniline into the water supply, and Weinbrecht.

I didn't know the extent to which the organisation was helping me. Perhaps Weinbrecht was the last thing they were going to do for me. I didn't know if I could rely on them moving forward and I had to account for that. If I planned for none of their help, then any help they did provide would be a bonus.

I needed to deal with Clarice. With her on the investigation, it was never going to move forward. However, I was conflicted on exactly how I wanted to deal with her. After meeting Weinbrecht, hearing of his death only put a smile on my face. But Weinbrecht was the living stereotype of evil. I needed to meet Clarice if I was going to decide how to proceed with this.

"Hello, is this Miss Clarice Smith?" I asked into the phone, pacing back and forth across my living room floor.

"Yes, speaking," a female voice responded on the other side.

"Hi, yes, I am calling concerning the investigation into the Aniline seepage in district R3."

"And what specifically?" she asked.

"I was wondering if we could arrange a meeting, I have a few questions I need to ask you personally. "

The phone fell quiet. I stopped my pacing, the floorboard creaking beneath my foot being the last sound before the eerie silence took over.

"All public inquiries must reach a consensus amongst the district before they can be addressed," she finally replied in a flat tone.

"A consensus amongst the district? What does that mean?"



"It means sir, that any questions must be supported by at least one thousand district verified citizen signatures. Then we will address the inquiry."

"What?" I replied in disbelief. What she was asking for were signatures from nearly 20% of the district's population. "Why does a question require a such a large public consensus?"

"Because we don't have time to answer every question the public has. As long as the public clearly demonstrate that this is a question they want answered, we will be happy to answer any question you have."

"You want me to get a thousand signatures from a population of five thousand? All to ask you a question? Do you realise how big of an undertaking you are asking of me?"

"It is not for me to say sir; did you have any other questions?"

I gripped the top of my sofa. Her nonchalant attitude was destroying my calm demeanour. Of course she wasn't going to make this easy. Of course I would have to fight this. But fight it I would.

"Fine, I'll get you your thousand signatures. Then you'll have no choice but to answer to me," I ended as I hung up. It was a slight slip up in my wording. I didn't mean to add the extra 'to' in 'answer to me'. Yet a part of me let it happen anyway.

I decided to plan my approach. First, I needed an actual question that people would support me asking. One that was easy enough to explain but would still interest the public enough to want an answer for themselves. I walked back over to my desk and leaned over my notepad.

"The general public's inquiry into the-" the word escaped me for a moment, "fitness?"

I couldn't think of how to word it in a simple yet fleshed out way.

"People vs-" no this wasn't a court case. I spent a couple more minutes formulating my thoughts.

"Inquiry into possible conflicts of interest by Clarice Smith on the investigatory board," I mulled it over once through and decided it would have to do. I still needed to actually reach out to people. That was going to be the hard part.

Printing posters and flyers, I detailed the role Clarice Smith had in the construction of Indar Rubber's factory and decided to get the message onto the streets. Beginning the next morning, I headed out, posters in hand, stapling the call for signatures onto every street lamp and tree. Each house I visited took nearly 15 minutes of my time as I explained what the signatures were for. Most people were content to ignore the issue, refusing to give their signature.

By lunch time I had collected only ten signatures, my pile of posters almost depleted. Through aching feet and strained back I persevered, walking from door to door in a dizzying pattern of front lawns and door bells. The noises and speech beginning to blend into one, with each house beginning to look and feel exactly the same as the previous one.

By 5pm I was depleted of energy, but still I pushed on. Every rejection stung more and more, and I didn't understand why so many people were happy to just live with the problem. I began taking it personally as each person who rejected the petition became complicit in allowing things like this to happen.

At 9pm I collapsed onto my sofa, the last flyers in my hand falling to the ground in a heap, the posters long since gone. I had collected 40 signatures. 4% of the way to the goal. I was completely demoralised and stuffed my head into a couch cushion before giving out a short but concise shout of frustration.

Turning myself over, I laid on my back and stared at the ceiling. I took a deep breath and listened to the same eerie silence as the day before, when Clarice paused before her answer. The deafening silence of inner thought.

I needed their help. I didn't want to admit it but without them, I would never get the signatures, I would never reach Clarice and I would never get the closure for which I so desperately yearned.

I needed that closure.

"I need your help," I said out loud, before closing my eyes.

After what felt like only moments later, I woke to a ringing telephone. Lazily pulling out my smartphone from my pocket, I saw a number I didn't recognise.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Warren? My name is Tim Wright, I'm with Vantage Media Consulting, I will be your personal contact for any questions you may have."

"Vantage Media?"

"Yes, the social media marketing firm you hired today. Your assistant has already finalised the payments with us and we can begin working right away!"

"Right, yes of course," I said as the doorbell rang, "excuse me one moment."

Holding the phone against my chest, I walked over to the door and peered through the peep hole. "Joe's Pizza Palace" was written on the boy's hat.

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## Chapter Two

"It's all about the image and presentation," Tim told me while the waitress poured the hot coffee into my mug.

"Your current question, 'Inquiry into possible conflicts blargh'. It's boring. It puts people to sleep before they get to the end of the sentence. You want to run a campaign. You basically are. You want to get a thousand votes and people need to believe in you," Tim continued as I took a sip from the steaming coffee, retracting my lips as the heat seared them.

"This isn't about me, I'm trying to ask a question to the investigatory board," I reasoned back, "I'm not trying to win a seat on the council."

"If you want people to support your cause, they have to support you," Tim took a moment for me to respond. I nodded my head to allow him to continue.

"Good, so we don't even need to start with a question for the investigatory board. We just need people to want to question the investigatory board. We need to start by getting people riled up. Say you're an average joe living in his house watching the same jeopardy re-run from last week. I ring the doorbell and piss you off. Now you've gotta get up and walk," Tim mimicked a walking gesture with his fingers from the left side of the diner's table to the right, "alllllll the way from your couch to your front door. You're already gonna start the conversation with a negative tone."

I nodded in agreement. So far, he had a point.

"What we need to do is use that anger, and shift it to your target. The investigatory board. 'Hey there, sorry for bothering you, but we've got a problem.' This is good, forget that nonsense innocent Mormon crap. Make it sound like some punk kid knocked over his mailbox. It will sound like a cause that he can actually help fix."

Tim wrote some notes down, seemed like he was figuring it out as we went along.

"Now that we've got his attention, and made it clear that we're not the problem, we try to trick his feeble mind onto your side. 'Have you been experiencing any fatigue recently? Any headaches? Backaches? If so you may be suffering symptoms of Aniline poisoning'," Tim smiled, "Everyone suffers headaches and backaches. Everyone thinks they're the only ones with pain. Fatigue is such a general term that they will almost definitely be feeling tired at some point," Tim waved away the waitress as she came around with the pot of coffee again.

"Now you've scared him. 'Oh shit, I AM being poisoned by Aniline! But what's Aniline?'" he'll be wondering. Then, depending on the guy, you can use a bunch of different follow-up sentences. If the guy looks like he's a crackpot conspiracy theorist, whip something up about how the government is trying to poison him through his drinking water. If it's a soccer mom with 10 different essential oils on the cupboard behind her, tell her how the toxins are giving her kids autism."

Tim was a bit of a loose cannon. But he was apparently one of the top social media campaign managers in the state and he seemed to have people pinned down by their personality. I wonder if he knew what personality he was.

"I don't really want to mislead people. Aniline doesn't cause backaches," I responded.

"What's the lady's name? Claire? Clarice was it? Do you think she's fighting fair? A 20% coverage of the district is a ridiculous expectation. A few more people and the district becomes a swing state for presidential elections. We're going to need to use every trick in the book to get those signatures. Which leads on nicely to my other strategy. High school volunteers," Tim made a grand gesture with both arms as if he'd made a revelation, "think about an army of cute cheerleaders going around asking old dudes for their signatures all while being paid below minimum wage."

I sat in front of Tim as he readjusted the collar on his polo shirt. He continued to detail his methods of canvassing the entire district with door-to-door salesman tactics. "You don't have time to go to every door and give them your whole spiel. We've got more important things to do with your time. We need your image, your face, to become the resistance against the 'big bad board'," Tim dropped into a deeper voice for 'big bad board', mimicking the movement of a lumbering giant with his arms, "If we just get the people angry enough to demand answers, the board will just host a press conference full of empty buzzwords about how they are doing everything they can. We need the people to want you to stand up for them and ask the hard-hitting questions. Then you will get your private conversation."

And so began the campaign. Marching from house to house, and door to door, an army of canvassers and cheerleaders, using every trick in the book to get signatures, and more importantly, their spirit into my cause. Within hours I began receiving calls on my new campaign cell phone from both the young and elderly telling me how they support what I was fighting for and that they hope I can help save them. Save them. Like I was a superhero.

It didn't help that the photo shoot of heroic poses ended up on posters all across the district. They were placed in strategic positions, near traffic lights, crosswalks, places where people stop for a few moments before carrying on with their day.

"The government is poisoning us!" I cried to the crowd gathered at the rally grounds. The crowd replying with feverish boos.

"They don't care for us, and the investigatory board is corrupted. Corrupted by the very people who decided to choose money over our health!" I yelled enthusiastically into the megaphone. The booing intensified amidst the crowd, intentionally packed into a small place to increase discomfort, insults being thrown at the board.

"And there is one person to blame. Clarice. Smith."

With the final sentence, the boos transformed into rage. The screams for their heads, for somebody to do something, for me to do something, rose to a crescendo.

"You're a natural at this," Tim said into my ear piece, "look at those monsters, ready to shred any target at your behest," he remarked. I stood on the stage, the megaphone now to my side as I took in their fury. I let it fuel my own hatred and allowed myself to bask in their energy.

Two weeks later, almost half the district had signed the petition.

"Good afternoon, is this Mr. Warren?" a young voice asked softly on the other side of the line.

"Yes, speaking," I replied.

"Good afternoon sir, I am speaking on behalf of Ms. Smith of the investigatory board. She would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience," her, presumably, assistant asked. I smiled silently as I took a sip of brandy. The fan swirling above my head, filling my otherwise silent living room with its monotonous blades. The lights were still off, I never really had time to turn them on. I never felt the need to. It always felt like I was only going to be here temporarily.

"Sir?" the voice poked.

"This seems a bit premature. I have yet to submit the signatures to your office," I responded slyly. "Ms. Smith—" the voice on the other end of the line cracked slightly in distress, "she insists on meeting you. The signatures will not be necessary."

"Are you sure? I can continue until I have covered the entire district?" I soaked in the fun.

"Yes, please Mr. Warren," the voice had practically begged.

"Very well, inform Ms. Smith that I will be in her office tomorrow morning," I ordered, not giving them a choice in time and date, forcing them to accommodate me.

"Oh ok si—"

"Excellent, I look forward to our meeting," I said before abruptly hanging up. The fan continued swirling and the condensation on my glass began pooling onto my fingertips. I took another sip of brandy.



"This way Mr. Warren," the young secretary led me down the same hallway I had walked the first time I went to visit Weinbrecht. This time clad in my own fitted suit, I walked alongside Tim who somehow managed to look smug no matter the situation.

It was excusable in this case. The glances and tension in the air with every person we walked past was enough to force a smile out of me. I had become a celebrity almost overnight, crowds gathering to support my voice, the same crowd now stationed outside in the cold winter morning. Their cries still faintly audible even this far into the building, a designated hype man keeping the crowd's energy alive. They, like everything, were part of a plan.

Out there I was a celebrity, but in here I was a thing to be feared apparently. As the secretary led us into a quiet part of the building, we walked up to a door with the same type of card on the door that Weinbrecht had, but this time for Clarice Smith.

"Mr. Warren is here," the secretary said into the slightly ajar door, her head leaning into the room.

"Send them in," a faint female voice said on the other side of the door.

"Ms. Smith will see you now," the secretary said as she stood to the side holding the door open for me.

"I'll be right out here," Tim whispered with a thumbs-up. I walked into the room with a subtle smile, my eyes not betraying my distrustful opinion of Clarice.

"Please, Mr. Warren, take a seat," Clarice pointed at one of two leather seats in front of her desk as she sat down herself. I unbuttoned my suit to avoid crumpling it as I sat down.

"Mr. Warren, you've made quite a stir," Clarice fidgeted as she shuffled some papers, seemingly at random, readjusting her seat position every few seconds, never seemingly comfortable.

"Indeed, all at your instruction of course," I jabbed.

"I understand you wanted to ask questions and learn about the Aniline poisoning," I did not like this woman. She didn't respond to the jab.

"Firstly, I must assert that we are both on the same side here," Clarice said making eye contact for the first time since I walked into the room. A clearly practised sentence. I refused to allow her to sit comfortably.

"I understand clearly that the investigatory board is working in my interest. But I would not be sitting in front of you right now if I believed that you were," I stated bluntly as I stared at her, her own gaze painfully attempting to stay locked onto mine.

"I assume you've done your research," I continued, standing back up and pacing slowly back and forth in front of her desk, "you must know my mother died of Methemoglobinemia," I paused and looked at her, "Aniline poisoning," before continuing my pacing. I liked being dramatic.

"And just like the other 5000 people in this district, the poison was slow, subtle and came through the water. However, you know that. I wouldn't be here if I thought you didn't know," I stopped again, placing my right hand on the back of my leather chair.

"You were the corporate liaison for the zoning board 5 years ago when Indar Rubber received the lease for a factory on Clay Street correct?"

"Well, yes-"

"Weinbrecht made quite a pretty penny off the contract, and in return he pulled some strings to allow you to extend your backyard by another 15 yards into a neighbour's legal property," I fell silent for a moment, focusing my eyes on hers once again, "and as Aniline began seeping into the water supply, Weinbrecht kept quiet, the bribes being far too lucrative. However, you didn't get anything. Not a penny. Yet you also stayed quiet."

The room fell silent as I analysed her pained expression. I was clearly hitting nerves and she seemed moments from shattering. I just needed one more push.

"15 yards, and my mother died. My question for you Clarice," calling her by her first name because she no longer deserved seniority in this conversation, "Is what did you get in return? What did Weinbrecht give you that you deemed so valuable to be worth more than my mother's life?"

Clarice was a mess. Her eyes straining to hold back tears, her jaw clearly tight.

"Give me my answer!" I roared across the table, dropping once again into silence, a silence far more pronounced after being contrasted against my rage.

"Nothing! I didn't get anything!" Clarice broke into tears, "Weinbrecht threatened to fire me and expose my property's zoning violations unless I kept silent. I swear! I didn't want to hurt anyone," Clarice finished as she began sobbing into a handkerchief, "it was just easier to do nothing, I'm sorry..." I stood back up straight, my strained face and tone lightening a bit at her confession. I couldn't help but feel pity for her.

I slowly moved the chair I held so tightly in my hands and sat back down facing her. Noting the less hostile tone, Clarice reduced her sobbing and looked back up at me.

"Have you seen the crowds outside?" I asked her. She nodded back.

"Have you seen how they rise and fall at my request?" She nodded, far more subtly this time.

"Your reputation is already under questioning, all because of me. And if I walk out of this meeting today, unhappy with its conclusion, the crowd will know. They will be told how you personally were complicit in the poisoning of every member of that crowd including their children," I leaned in forward, placing my elbows on her desk. Clarice leaned back instinctively. Animalistic defences were kicking in.

"And if that crowd is riled up one more time. Your job, your very life will be destroyed, never to recover, do you understand what I am saying?" I waited for her response. After a moment, she nodded once more.

"From this moment onwards," I said more relaxed as I stood back up, she was currently vulnerable and malleable, "you will be my voice inside the investigatory board. I will bring you charges, I will bring you evidence, I will bring you the heads of the people that decided to profit

over poison. And you will be my executioner," I walked over to her window. My window. The crowd was just visible around the corner of the building. Their voices so faint in the distance.

"You will answer to me and by the end of this, if you did your job exactly as I required, I may keep what I know a secret, and you can keep your 15 yards," I walked over to her side of the desk, one hand in my pocket, I leaned over her. She was a broken character at this point. Completely subject to my will. And did I feel powerful.

"Do you understand Ms. Smith?"

Another nod. More rapid, submissive.

"Good," I pulled back, rebuttoning my suit as I prepared to leave, "I will be in contact in the next few days. You'd better be ready to answer the call; do you have any questions before I depart Ms. Smith?" I turned to look at her one more time as I reached the door.

"This- This all goes very high up the food chain," she squeaked out, her tiny form mostly hidden behind her desk at this point, "How do you plan to take them down?"

I smiled back at her as I opened the door, "I assure you Ms. Smith," I said as I turned to walk out of the room, pausing right in the doorway, "my friends are much higher."

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## Chapter Three

"What's his name again? Warren?"

"Yes sir."

"Hmph," the man in the tan suit grunted as he looked at his desk in idle concentration.

"Does he actually have any evidence?"

"Not that we know of sir."

"So why should I care?" The tan suit asked.

"Well, he's got a lot of support. And the investigatory board will have to comply to some degree."

"What the hell was this over again? A factory?"

"Yes sir. The rubber processing plant on Clay Street. He claims it is leaking chemicals into the neighbourhood's water supply."

"Hmph," the tan suit grunted again, "Let's ignore this for now and hope it fixes itself. If it gets any bigger, tell me."

"Yes sir," the assistant stepped out of the room.



"I don't think so!" the man said, lying on his back, one arm raised in defence, "if it were the case I would've known!"

"Nah see that ain't gon' work. Not for me, probably not for Eddy either, do it Eddy?"

"Nah it ain't workin' fo' me," Eddy responded, waving his baseball bat like he was practising.

"Yeah see, Eddy don' like it none. So why dontcha get off ya sorry ass, and make it work fo' us?"

"I already told you. Those records are kept in the public office. I wouldn't be able to access them even if I wanted to!" the man's eyes darted between the fat and thin man.

"Hmm, see no I really don' think Eddy is gon' like that either, do ya Eddy?"

"Not one bit," the large man responded.

"Yeah see, he don' like it. And Eddy sure don' like it, when he don' like it."

"I don'," Eddy responded.

"I'll give you what I can give you! Just please! Leave my house and leave me alone!"

"You got three days to cough up the docs. Pull whateva strings you gotta pull. But you get us those docs and then," the thin man smiled and made a leaning back gesture, his arms spread open like he was revealing a new car model, "then we'll be fine and dandy."

"I'll do it, I'll do whatever I can!"

"Great, you happy wit dat Eddy?"

"Bright as sunshine," Eddy responded, never moving, always staring at the man on the ground. The baseball bat adding to his intimidation factor.



"See, ya made Eddy happy," the thin man smiled for an awkward amount of time, "great, lets go Eddy."



"Gosh, you are just absolutely stunning when you smile, do you know that?" the young man in the well tailored grey suit said to the young woman.

"Oh stop!" the young woman responded with glee, "I bet you say that to all the transcribers you meet," she mumbled with a flirty smile.

"Only the pretty ones," he responded quickly as if he had it preloaded.

"You're just the worst!" she said, completely contradicting her sentence with her red cheeks.

"Good evening, may I take your orders?" the waiter said in an overly posh British accent.

"Oh yes, I will have the Lamb Salad with- Fregola? I'm not sure I pronounced that right," the young woman said anxiously. She looked at her date across the table who gave her a reassuring nod.

"And I will have the Pappardelle with Sea Urchin," the man added.

"Very good, and your drinks?" the waiter inquired again, leaning over to his side slightly as he drew out the end of the word 'drinks'.

"We will have the 1994 Domaine Leroy Richebourg Grand Cru," the man said, much to the surprise of the young woman.

"Very good sir, will there be anything else?"

The young man gestured in questioning to the young woman across the table who gestured a 'no' back with a simple hand wave.

"That will be all right now," the young man said with a gentle smile. The waiter nodded and walked away.

"My, oh my you sure know your wines," the girl blushed for the third time.

"Well, you know," the young man shrugged, "what were we talking about?"

"You were asking me about my job."

"Ah yes, a transcriber, that sounds fascinating. You must have tremendous typing speed."

"Haha yeah, I get that a lot. It's more of a technique thing? You have to be able to create short formed words on the fly. That way you can keep up with conversations."

"I see, and do you just do freelance work or...?"

"Oh no, I actually work for a company. Indar Rubber, not sure if you've ever heard of them."

"No, can't say I have," the young man smiled before leaning in to hold her hand across the table. She blushed harder in response but managed to keep her composure.

"Oh, it's some random conglomerate. I just sit in their meetings and tap tap tap away on my keyboard. I'm sorry, this is a very boring subject!" the young woman blushed, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Please, nothing coming out of your mouth will ever be boring to me," the young man managed to glint his eyes against the ceiling lights.



"I'm not sure how you got this information, but it's the bullseye we needed," Brian said over the phone, "get the information down in paper-form and we'll send it over to Clarice by post. That way it can be destroyed, no evidence."

"Do we have any guarantee she will destroy it?" I asked, leaning back in my desk chair, loosening my tie.

"It's in her interest as much as ours to not let this source go public. Plus, there's nothing tying the letter back to you. Just make sure you don't sign your name at the end," Brian laughed on the other end of the line.

"Thanks Brian," I smirked, "I'll see you around."

"Take care," he replied before hanging up. Where they managed to find a lawyer so willing to do 'less-than-legal' consultation was something I was curious about. Another question added onto the giant list I was building up in my head. The living room was quiet, as it always was, the lights off. The glow of the laptop illuminating my face. That, coupled with the dusk sunlight filtering, slant-wise, through the large front window, the room glowed with an orange illumination.

I cracked my fingers and got back to work.

"Ms. Smith,

Public Records office: A1724-H4582"

I copied the listings from the form on my desk that highlighted the transactions between Weinbrecht and Indar Rubber. The documentation was there, all the lies and deceit were well documented, but exposing it was the main issue. With Clarice Smith working for me however, it wouldn't be an impossible task. I continued writing,

"Make your case with these records. Terrence Hatcher must go down in handcuffs."

I looked up at my cork board of faces. All the way at the top was Terrence. CEO of Indar Rubber. All lines led to him and I had reason to believe he made the deal personally with Weinbrecht. I looked at the man's face, chiselled like a sculpture. I assumed the photo I had was photoshopped for enhancement but there was no doubt his hair was done up to the last strand, his cheeks puffed with the exact amount of powder to not let it shine.

He wasn't the only target left, but he was the biggest. Getting him would mean I could get anyone. He was the CEO but he had dealings in at least a dozen other companies that I tracked. All probably linked through offshore accounts or some kind of tax haven. But I only needed one catch.

I looked the letter one time over and decided that it conveyed just enough information as necessary. I was putting a lot of faith in Clarice's abilities and that didn't sit well with me. I didn't know if I could trust her yet and that meant I needed a backup plan.

"I need Clarice Smith's illegal zoning documentation. The 15 yards," I said out loud to the living room. Naturally, nobody responded. But they were listening. I knew that much at this point. I thought back to Ira. She was appearing in my head more and more as this organisation kept providing. She had been at my mother's funeral. It was far too much of a coincidence. What role did she play in all this? Every second was a battle to just ask out loud into the room. To sate my curiosity. However now was not the time. There would be time later.

Within a few hours, the doorbell rang and I brought the pizza into my room. The pepperoni and pineapples were overshadowed by the big text written on the inside of the cover of the box.

S6823-R1952

The record number for Clarice's 15 yards. I returned to the letter and added an extra line.

"Just to make sure you keep your word: S6823-R1952"

I printed out the letter, folded it into an envelope and addressed it to Clarice. The orange envelope smelled of a post office, its texture that of new dry paper, unsettling to the skin. The

same feeling when someone scratches a chalkboard. Shivers down your spine, palms sweating slightly.

I stood in my hallway looking out of my living room window. The sun had completely set at this point and the street lights illuminated the quiet road outside. With one hand in my pocket, I tapped the letter against my leg idly as I thought of the whole situation I was in. How I'd tripped and fallen head first into this entire system of blackmail and murder. Somebody had died because of me.

I watched as a man in a dark top and jeans walked past my window. The quiet always did this. The silence of my living room always forced inner reflection, thoughts on the bigger scale. Ira popped into my head again for a split second before I saw the man pull out an object from his pocket and hold it in my direction. The glass of my window cracked violently but held firm as two pops rang out. 'Guns don't sound like they do in the movies' was the first thought that came to my mind.

I was completely frozen, standing still. What had just happened? It was too quick to even contemplate let alone get scared. I approached my window cautiously and noted the single bullet lodged in the glass. All of the cracks originating from that single bullet, like a street map of a metropolis. Looking past the cracks, I saw the man prone on the ground, face down. I looked up and down the street and noticed a van slowly pulling up the road from the right.

The van crawled down the road, its headlights disallowing any ability to see its occupants. I was about to move away from the window, for fear that this was the assassin's backup, before the headlights turned off and the van sped up to the curb where the man lay on the ground. Joe's Pizza Palace was written on the side of the van. The door slid open as two figures hopped out and silently lifted the body off the ground and loaded it into the van. One figure returned outside and sprayed the ground with some mist, like a weak power washer, before getting back into the van and driving off.

The orange letter was still in my hand, my tie still loose around my neck. Besides the large crack in my window, the street lights still illuminated the empty and quiet street, my ceiling fan still blowing slow and cool air onto my head. I finally realised the adrenaline shooting through my system as my body collectively reacted with one gigantic shiver.

Perhaps it was time to contact the organisation.

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## Chapter Four

"Damn, he's got some resolve."

"What'd you mean?"

"He just stood there. He got shot at and he barely flinched. Maybe the boss really does see something in this guy."

"I mean, he's been pretty successful so far," the man said slightly absentmindedly as he filled in a document on his second screen, "how's the bulletproof glass holding up?"

"Integrity seems fine. Seems Kapilan Tech wasn't lying about their quality."

"Only the best for Mr. Warren," the man said in a slightly raised and posh tone, casually turning back to his screen as he takes a sip from his coffee, "Sniper-1 this is Command, SITREP, over."

The radio stayed silent for a second before crackling into life, the ambient sounds of the night coming through the channel as static, "This is Sniper-1, all clear, over."

"Roger that Sniper-1," the controller responded before turning to the other man for an aside, raising his hand to cover his microphone even though he wasn't broadcasting, "send in the clean-up crew," he said before returning to his own radio channel, "QRF you're clear to move in for reconnaissance-

"Extract him," she said standing behind them.

The man jumped slightly at the sound of her voice, "Oh- uh right away Ma'am," instinctively sitting more upright and closer to the screen, the man next to him also mimicking the reaction.

"QRF, disregard last message, move in for HVT extraction, how copy, over?"

The radio crackled back into life, this time a muffled voice replying, "This is QRF, read you Lima Charlie, we're moving in, over."

"Alright boys, prep for HVT extraction," the man riding shotgun said as he lowered the radio down into his lap.

"Command, out" the radio let out a final message, subdued by the sounds of magazines loading into guns, guns cocking and safeties being turned off. The van turned the street corner and closed in on the Warren residence.

"Standard procedure boys, get up a 360 perimeter on arrival, Rick and I will retrieve the HVT."



Within minutes another van pulled up to the house. This time far less inconspicuous than the last one. This one was pure black with its windows completely tinted, it moved quickly and parked right in front of my door. I assumed it wasn't hostile since it wasn't being shot at by whatever sniper shot the, now dead, hitman.

I watched as the van opened up and people spilled out from every door. A few of the masked men stood in a circle around the van, watching multiple angles while two of the masked men ran

up to my door and knocked rather violently. If they wanted to kill me, they could've. They weren't here to hurt me. So I answered the door.

"Mr. Warren, we're here to take you to safety," the tallest man said with a slight sense of urgency. I could sense his urge to just pull me out of the doorway and into the van, but his body language showed that he was very deliberately stopping himself from crossing the door frame. The man next to him held a small submachine gun of some kind and seemed to be looking into my house rather than at me.

"I understand, let's go," there was no need to question them, not out here. They were clearly extremely alert and on guard. They would probably just blow off any questions for the sake of urgency. I could ask the questions later. The men turned around and walked me to the van at a brisk pace.

It was strange walking outside in this situation. I felt the coldness of the outside air as soon as I stepped out and despite the amount of people in my vicinity, it was quiet. Like just another day in my neighbourhood. Not two minutes ago was a man shot and killed right in front of my house. Yet the serenity of a quiet suburb was juxtaposed heavily against the tense men pointing guns in every direction.

I walked up to the van and the side door slid open. Within seconds, everyone had mechanically piled back into the van. The stench inside the van smelt of humidity and oil. It wasn't necessarily a bad smell, but the air was thick. Probably due to number of bodies stuck together in close proximity.

"Sir do we bag him?" a quiet voice asked into his headset, clearly meaning to be private.

"Are you kidding? He's highest clearance," the man riding shotgun answered loudly, the driver only acknowledging with a nod and starting the van. Despite the fragile look of the van, it started smoothly and quietly. The interior, at least the driver's portion of it, looked modern, with built in GPS and everything. It was unexpected to say the least.

"Who are you people?" I asked the man sitting across me. He stayed silent, opting instead to look awkwardly at the man sitting next to me. The awkwardness lingered in the air and normally I would feel obligated to rephrase the question. But in this case, I stayed silent. Call it a power move but the silence only put the stress of answering the question on them.

"We're not authorised to speak with you sir," a man at the back of the van finally answered. The mask muffled his voice, which at first glance appeared to just be a ski mask. However, on closer inspection, there seemed to be some plastic integrated into the mouth area of the mask.

"Is anyone in this van authorised?" I asked aloud, this time directing my voice towards the driver. More awkward silence.

"Your questions will be answered sir, all in good time," the same man answered again. I had gotten all I could get out of them and just sat back instead, unsure where to direct my eyes with people all around me. From the little I could see out of the front windows, it seemed to be an industrial area that we were pulling up to. Seemed pretty cliché. The van stopped at some kind of sheltered loading bay and the men silently exited, far more relaxed than the previous time.

I stepped out of the van and watched my first breath form a white cloud out into the cold air. The general voiceless grunts seemed to be walking off into one direction but the other two, the ones who had approached my door, guided me in to the building. I was guided through a series of indistinguishable hallways, only filled with lights and doors, all of which were closed. After what seemed like a geometrically impossible number of turns, the final door opened to a gigantic interior space. I looked up in awe at the size of it all.

Inside were a few raised metal platforms with stairs and, between every space, on both the ground and the raised platforms, were computers. Rows and rows of computers, each with their own operator. People walking back and forth along the rows, some on the phone, others urgently rushing through this and that door. The men walked me to a raised position overlooking the entire area. It itself did not have any computers or electronics, only appearing to serve as a platform to watch the floor. The platform led back into the interior hallway area of the building, with a single door ending the platform.

I watched the busy floor move like a movie scene for a stock market. Some of the people down there had almost 15 monitors, stacked three monitors tall. It was messy yet organised. Chaotic yet controlled.

"Wha-" I turned to ask before noticing the two men were gone, nearly at the bottom of the steps they had led me up.

"David." A female voice said behind me. A voice that instantly calmed me. A voice I was conditioned to derive joy from. I turned around and saw her.

"Ira." I answered. She was really a part of all this. It was unbelievable yet there she stood. I saw her long hair still draped down to her shoulders, her eyes still piercing in their gaze. She was still the slender framed girl that I once crushed over. "I haven't heard my first name in a long time."

"Apologies, Mr. Warren."

She still had her wit. Her most attractive feature. She approached me slowly, and for a moment, perhaps naively, thought she was coming in for a kiss, but instead she turned towards the floor of the 'stock market'. "What do you think?" she asked.

"It's... incredible. What is it?"

"Eyes and ears, everywhere."

I understood.

"Is my living room on one of those screens?"

"Yes. That one," Ira pointed at a screen far in the distance, squinting and getting on her tip toes as if actually trying to reach it. I chuckled at her playful gesture and she smirked back in return. It was like we were in high school again.

"I'm sorry about your mother," she said after a short pause. I looked back down at her somberly. "She was always really kind to me," she continued.

"You were there right?" I asked her abruptly.

"Where?"

"The funeral."

"Oh. Yes, I'm sorry about that I-"

"No no, it's fine. I just. I've been, confused. This has all been really strange and I was never 100% sure if you were connected to all this."

"Yeah, I figured the pizza would-"

"It did," I said with a smile. Her demeanour relaxed, and she smiled back.

"So, how are you connected to all this?" I asked her. She looked slightly confused and answered back matter-of-factly, "I run it."

"You what."

"I'm in charge," she responded sternly again.

"You're in charge?"

"I think that's what I just said."

I stayed silent for a second. Out of disbelief.

"Wha- just. How?"

She smiled in response, "it's a long story. I'll tell you some other time."

"And... why? Why have you been helping me?"

"Because," she sighed as she took a small step back to look down at the monitors below, "I always regretted the way we split up. I hit you and I shouldn't have. I loved you and yet was so willing to hurt you in that moment." She looked back up at me, her light attitude now gone, her face rigid, holding back any emotion from showing. "I went through a period of change, a long period. Not for your sake, but mostly what led me into this position. At first, I just watched you. Out of curiosity, to see how you were doing."

I leaned my forearms on the rail but kept my head turned towards her. She soon mimicked my posture. Possibly subconsciously.

"I watched you and saw your struggle to get the apartment on..."

"Broad Street."

"Right," she gestured towards me like I'd made a small revelation, "Broad Street. I realised I could help you get it and... so I did. I felt like I owed you and as I got higher up this organisation, helping you wasn't even a strain on our resources. So, I kept doing it. But then..." she trailed off once more, her aura getting dark once again.

"Then I watched you taking care of your sick mother. I saw the cork board of faces forming. I saw the late nights bent over the desk trying to tie pieces together. I saw you falling apart and still keeping it together, for her. But for that, I could do nothing. In hindsight I could've helped. I could've helped move your mother. I could've aided your research. At the time I was worried I would have to reveal that I'd been spying on you. It was easier to just do nothing and convince myself that this was just 'your path' that you needed to take alone." She had spoken so fast and unbroken that her silence now hurt more. "It was bullshit," she continued, "It never occurred to me that your mother could've actually died and that, when she did, I came to her funeral to apologise. For everything. 'I'm sorry' was all I could muster."

The fact that she had been watching me fall into such misery made me feel exposed, naked. How much had I done while she was watching that I wouldn't have wanted anyone to see? My mind began racing through years of memories.

"And now they tried to kill you," she added in finality.

I knocked back into reality.

"So, I brought you here. To my intelligence gathering network. For you to use. If they aren't going to play fair, we won't either."

Ira turned to me expectantly, waiting for my response. She was tense and probably couldn't predict what my answer would be. I watched as life continued on the floor below, not a care for what was happening up here.

"Well then," I finally answered, "let's get to work."

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## Chapter Five

Ira introduced me to Ken and told me he would take care of me while I stayed here in the 'Birdhouse'. I followed Ken down the steps and into the sea of computer screens and people. The scent down on the ground floor was far more substantial. A mix of coffee and bleach filled my nostrils as men and women slid past us wearing all kinds of scented colognes and perfumes. Ken walked past a couple of rows and reached what looked like an office space but without the walls. There sat a Hispanic looking man who stood up to meet us.

"This is Eduardo, he's the floor manager, whatever you need intelligence wise, he'll know where to get it."

"Nice to meet you Mr. Warren!" Eduardo introduced himself, his mouth exaggerating every syllable, a huge smile across his face.

"Likewise," I replied.

"If you need anything, feel free to call me on this phone," Ken said as he handed me a small flip phone.

"Surely this phone will look suspicious if used in public? Have we not yet upgraded to smart phones?" I asked semi-jokingly.

Ken laughed, "smartphones come with operating systems that are constantly updating, full of potential exploits and bugs. These old flip phones are easier to manage and are more secure."

I nodded in agreement. He had a fair point.

"That should be it then, welcome to the Birdhouse Mr. Warren," Ken concluded as he walked away. I watched him go while trying to pinpoint his origin. The man was clearly half Asian but was it Chinese or Japanese? Korean possibly? I was never very good at this game.

"We've been monitoring your situation for a while Mr. Warren," Eduardo broke my train of thought from behind.

"Yes, I noticed," I replied, "So, I have a question. It was... was it bulletproof gl-"

"Yes. We installed it when you were visiting Clarice Smith," he answered.

"Did you know they would try to-"

"It was a precautionary measure. We had no intel to suggest that they were going to try to hit you tonight."

"Right. Ok." I paused. "Well then, where do we begin?" I asked expectantly. It was all so overwhelming, but I was adamant to not let my exasperation show.

"Great, your interests will be in that corner," Eduardo said as he pointed into the distance, the same corner Ira pointer to when I asked where my living room camera was, "We've been colloquially referring to it as the Warren corner since, well, it concerns you."

"I'm flattered."

"Madam Ira has a high opinion of you Mr. Warren," Eduardo said with a smile, possibly with a hint of poison, "I hope you exceed our expectations."

"I hope I do too Eduardo," I responded, "and, what exactly is this? Ken called it the Birdhouse, but, who does it belong to?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question."



"What affiliation? Is this the Italian Mob? Yakuza?"

"Ah, well, there are many Italian Mobs. The Japanese have a bit of a monopoly on crime under the Yakuza but otherwise most countries have multiple mobs," Eduardo smiled and paused for a moment too long, perhaps expecting me to say something. I stayed quiet. He continued, "But I get what you mean. We are not a crime organisation as per the usual definition. We are an intelligence and logistics centre that acts for and on behalf of all associated crime organisations," Eduardo explained as if he was giving a tour he had given a million times, reciting the same line every time.

"I'm going to need more detail than that."

"Yes, it's a bit to wrap your head around. We started out as a cooperative effort by a few of the Italian crime families to gather intelligence and share it amongst themselves. The catch being that they each had to contribute something, either their intelligence networks, agents, strong arms, logistics..." Eduardo trailed off as he seemed to get distracted by something in the distance before returning his attention to me, "things like that. However, criminal organisations are pretty bad at talking to each other. We had the advantage of being a neutral and independent party that was just made up of the other criminal organisations. The Italians, the Triad, the Yakuza, they simply refer to us as 'their' intelligence network since they contribute to a part of it and basically have access to it like if it was their own."

Eduardo walked to an open space flanked on all sides by men and women with their backs to us, staring at their many monitors. The monitors flickered and flashed, some being CCTV feeds like they were a security guard at a mall, while some were text based. The contents, indecipherable at this distance.

"The van that brought you here for example, were members of Hells Angels MC. They offer their manpower in exchange for intelligence that they would never have been able to get themselves. Likewise, without their manpower, we wouldn't be able to get certain things done."

"And these organisations are fine with you helping their rivals?" I asked as I noticed a brief flicker on one of the monitors showing the outside of my house, the street mostly empty save for a few men replacing my cracked window.

"Indeed, there was some backlash before, and some organisations have tried to take control of us by force. But again, we ARE the other organisations too and the other organisations saw it as a personal attack on their own intelligence network. The few times there has been an attempt at a hostile takeover, a coalition of the other organisations show up to put the aggressor in their place. This creates a sort of stalemate where all organisations simply passively benefit from us. It's symbiosis. It's easier to just let us be and everyone gets what they want."

"Fascinating," I responded, slightly dumbfounded. It seemed so simple. It was an ecosystem of crime that naturally balanced itself, with the end result being this strange data centre filled with members from every criminal organisation. "And this place, the Birdhouse, is this the only one or-"

"No, there are many others in other countries, depending on the presence of the criminal organisations we are associated with. Every country that has our network is run by an Overseer, which is what Madam Ira is. The Overseers form a loose sort of board of directors," Eduardo scrunched his face and made vague gestures with his hands while he said, 'sort of'. "Together our network becomes a global enterprise, but there is no one name if that's what you're asking. We simply go by the nicknames of these intelligence centres. This one just happens to be called the Birdhouse."

"It's a nice name."

"Isn't it Mr. Warren? Do you have any other questions?"

"Yes, you say everyone here is from a criminal organisation, which one are you from?"

"I am from the Juárez Cartel."

I stood there shocked. "You're from a Mexican Cartel? Even the Cartels are in this?"

"Almost everyone has their hands here in some shape or form. Except the Russians. They refuse to work with us," Eduardo looked back at me with a smile, "Why? Do I not look like a Cartel member?" he ended with a laugh.

"I wouldn't have pegged you as one honestly."

"Not all members of the Cartel are covered in Calavera tattoos Mr. Warren, some of us need to blend in," he smiled a warm smile. I nodded back slowly, contemplating all that I was told. Finally, I decided I'd heard enough backstory, it was time to figure out what to do next.

"Do we have any confirmation on who ordered the hit on me?"

Eduardo moved into action, "We are sifting through our logs, we unfortunately can't listen to everyone simultaneously, so we tap their phones and then rewind and listen to them one by one. Unless something was found in the last 10 minutes, we're going to need more time to get through the logs."

I stood there pondering. There was probably only one man who had the power to call a hit on somebody and not immediately get turned over to the cops. Clarice Smith was far too weak and probably couldn't even afford a hitman. It wouldn't make much sense anyway. This had to be the work of Terrence Hatcher, CEO of Indar Rubber.

"We may not need to review everything. Check the associates of Terrence Hatcher. Do you have him tapped?"

"CEO of Indar Rubber, right? Yeah, we have him tapped. We'll get on that," Eduardo said as he gestured to one of the men sitting at a table. "Anyone else?"

"Not for a tap, but I need to talk to Clarice Smith, can you get me a meeting with her?"

"Where do you want to meet her? Her office? Her home?"

"Are you able to get me into her home?" I asked, slightly surprised that it sounded like a simple task.

"Not a problem, but are you sure you want to go to her yourself? We can handle information extraction."

"I don't know exactly what you mean with information extraction, but I'll be fine doing it myself, thank you."

"Very well," Eduardo said as he pulled out a phone and walked away, talking into it almost instantly. I pondered what I was going to say to Clarice. There was only so much that could be revealed through a phone tap. I needed Hatcher to talk about topics that he may otherwise avoid on a phone. I needed somebody close that would be a willing snitch. And it was for this exact reason I had originally approached Clarice.

"It's all set. She should be returning home in 2 hours. That gives us ample time to get in," Eduardo told me. An entire house break-in organised in under a minute. Quite impressive.

"Alright then," I said looking around as a few armed men walked up to me expectantly. The computers that used to watch me now flicking into Clarice's office, the hallway outside her office and the entire security checkpoint I had gone through at the start of all this. The smell of coffee once again filled my nose as I felt re-energized, ready to take down a CEO.

"Let's go," I ordered.

Within 15 minutes I was stood in Clarice Smith's living room, the serene quiet betrayed by the futuristic ski masked man standing to my side. We had broken into her house—although

perhaps "broken in" was a bit of a misnomer, it implies sound was made—and now stood in the dark, waiting for her return.

"You," I said pointing to the man across from me, another ski masked man, "hide in the adjacent room, block the entrance if it comes to that but otherwise, stay out of sight. That goes for all of you, don't come out unless she tries to leave."

The men nodded and moved to take their positions without hesitation. Perhaps allegorically, I felt at peace with myself, as if I were standing in my own living room once again. It allowed me to think of the bigger picture as my mind raced through thousands of memory fragments, all leading up to this moment. It was always energy draining and I forced myself to focus on the now and think about what I was going to say to Clarice.

The ear piece I was given crackled into life, "Clarice is one minute out," Eduardo informed from his lookout position. I felt a shock of nervousness run up my spine triggering a bead of sweat to drip down it. The last time I spoke to her, I was angry, I had determination. Now I came to her wanting something. This put me into a position of need. I planned of phrasing it as if she didn't have a choice, but if she suddenly decided she wanted no part in this, it could show weakness in myself.

The sound of a car parking and a car door slamming shut was followed by the sounds of the front door opening. I felt the anticipation building up as I waited for her to turn the corner into her living room, another bead of sweat running down my back. I tightened my face ensuring she would see a man of absolute calm and determination when she walked into view.

"She just went straight upstairs sir," one of the men said into the radio.

"Fuck," I stuttered out. I didn't consider that. "Alright, plan is the same, we wait for her to come down. Eduardo, watch the outside of the house just in case she tries to run. Whoever is at the back of the house, keep an eye out of the window."

"Roger," two voices said over the radio almost in unison.

This was awkward.

"Is that-" a voice said.

"Yeah that's-" another voice interjected. The sounds of running water and a shower started up.

"God damn it," I moaned to myself. This wasn't as badass as I was hoping it would be. The effect on Clarice should be the same but you never saw this aspect in the movies. How long the villain sat in the dark waiting for his victim. After around 15 minutes, the shower turned off and the sounds of movement shifted to the bedroom. In the silence of the house, every step she took echoed and shook the frames, wood creaking under her weight. Without knowing any better, it would seem as if she was actually alone in this house.

"Alright, she's coming out," a voice said over the radio, accompanied by the creaking of footsteps coming down the stairs. I moved back into position and stood completely still as she finally came around the corner, her head down, preoccupied on her smartphone.

"Ms. Smith," I said with a gentle voice, to reduce the shock value. I needed her intimidated, not terrified. That didn't stop the subsequent scream however.

"Who the- Warren?!" she screamed as she took a step back.

"Calm down, I'm not going to hurt you," I suggested, making sure to stand still, to not scare her any further.

"How did you get into my- wha- what do you want?" she cried out taking another step back.

"Take a seat, we need to talk," I said as I gestured to one of her chairs and slowly took a seat opposite it. With a bit of hesitation, she eventually managed to move and take the seat. Her face was scribbled with fear.

"Please put the phone on the table," I ordered, unmoving. She complied and reached out, as if feeding an alligator, retracting her hand as soon as possible.

"What do you want?" she said timidly. Her posture was the essence of defensive. She had her legs tucked under her knees, arms crossed and chin lowered. The thin jumper she was wearing over her shirt closed shut.

"I have a use for you," I said leaning in, "I have come to collect on my favour, the promise you made me those weeks ago."

"What is it?" she said, somehow tucking her legs further under herself.

"Terrence Hatcher. I need you to meet him. Can you do that?"

She was suspicious, perhaps rightfully so, "yes... why?"

"I need some information from him. And I need you to get him to say it into a wire," I motioned at my chest, where a wire would sit.

"You want me to... to help you spy on him?!"

"It's not that ridiculous a proposal. You just walk into his office and have a conversation. A directed conversation."

She took pause. Her posture was still defensive but relaxed slightly, now that she knew that she wasn't in any immediate danger.

"And if I do this, are we square?"

I dropped the mood of my facial expression. I wasn't necessarily upset, but I wanted to help emphasise what I was about to say.

"Far, far from it Ms. Smith. We're 'square' when I say we are square." I said as I stood up, ending the conversation and denying her the freedom of choice.

"Someone will be along to set you up with the wire and a script of questions. You will learn the questions and ask him about all of them," as I walked past her, I made sure to get very close and invade her personal space. After all, I was a strange man who broke into her home. She leaned away as expected.

"You will make an appointment or whatever you need to do to see him. If you do well, you won't hear from me. You can just dump the wire. And Ms. Smith," I trailed off as I turned around to look at her again, her body shifted to turn around and watch me, "Terrence Hatcher is a bad, bad man. Don't forget that we are the good guys," I ended as I opened the door and walked out, leaving it open behind me.

"Everyone, leave your positions and exit through the front door."

Through the window, I watched Clarice's face turn to horror when man after man stepped out of the shadows and walked straight through the front door I just went through. She clearly had no idea they were there and was terrified by the realisation that I wasn't the only stranger in her house. The van pulled up and the men piled in. I looked at Clarice one more time as she watched me through the glass, giving her a single nod before getting in the van and driving off.

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## Chapter Six

Clarice Smith fidgeted with the microphone strapped under her shirt.

"We're checking the microphone quality Ms. Smith, can you say something for me?" I said, speaking into my phone.

"Testing- testing... can you hear me?" Her timid voice said as she leaned into the microphone strapped to her chest under the shirt. I watched her from one of the many cameras we had either placed ourselves or hacked into. She was in a business suit and had her phone held up to her ear, her posture screaming fear.

"Have you memorised the questions?"

"Yes Mr. Warren," she replied.

"Good, then proceed," I ended the call. I watched her put the phone in her purse and walk up the flight of stairs into the skyscraper that held Terrence Hatcher's office. I stood alongside Eduardo as we watched her go from monitor to monitor, making her way up the tower.

"Ira," I said with a surprised smile as she silently walked up beside me.

"David," she responded, uncharacteristically coldly, not looking me in the eyes. Perhaps she was being more stern around her 'employees'. I turned my attention back to the monitors.

"Do you trust her to get whatever you need from Terrence?" Ira asked, her eyes still on the monitors.

"I hope so. She has-", I stuttered, "she IS the direct link between Terrence and the zoning board. She knows him personally and should be privy to the information I need from him. He shouldn't be suspicious as to why these questions are being asked," I responded to Ira, looking at her again. She once again kept her eyes on the monitors.

"That's good, I hope we get what we need."

"Terrence," Clarice's digitised voice said over the screen.

"Ah, Clarice, what brings you here today," Terrence Hatcher responded warmly as he stood up from his desk and extended a hand. The camera we had tapped into was high up on the ceiling and only showed Clarice's back as she sat across his desk. Terrence however, was in full view.

"I have a few questions that I wanted to ask you, the investigatory board is getting restless with this whole Warren issue and it would be good to know the links between you and the Aniline-poisoning-the-water issue, so I know what to avoid. Rest assured we haven't found any link to Indar Rubber yet," Clarice reassured rather confidently, quite contradictory to how she normally spoke to me. I couldn't see Clarice's face but judging from Terrence's gestures and her posture, she was probably putting on a very friendly face herself.

"That's good to hear," Terrence responded with a jolly laugh, "whisky?"

"I'm fine thank you, it's eleven in the morning," Clarice responded.

"Nonsense, never too early!" he bellowed as he got up to pour some whisky in a single glass. The man looked like a barrel of laughs, a smile always on his face. Was this really the CEO that I loathed? The man that made the decision that killed my mother?

"Firstly, there's been some rumours that there was an attempt on Warren's life. Have you heard anything about this?"

"Yes, yes. The man is a thorn in our side and I deemed it far more convenient if he were removed. Evidently it has yet to work."

There he was. And so began the list of questions, each asking for more incriminating information than the last.

"May I have access to the offshore account lists, so I know to avoid their names if it comes up during an investigatory board meeting?"

Each expertly inter spaced with general chit chat, Clarice doing an excellent job of not seeming suspicious.

"How did you get the permits for the Shanghai factories?"

Most likely for self-preservation more than anything.

"How did Aniline end up in the water anyway? How did you get past inspection?"

"Ah the inspector owed a guy who owed a guy and we 'bought' his debt. He was our bitch the moment he was assigned to inspect our factory," Terrence laughed a belly laugh. What a scumbag.

"Do you know what exactly caused the leakage?"

"Eh, you'd have to ask one of the engineers, I'm not entirely certain. But the land we acquired for the factory wasn't actually suitable for the size and weight of the building itself. Something about water consistency of the soil and gibberish like that," Terrence paused to sip more of his whisky, "of course, less suitable means cheaper and that's how I keep the investors happy."

"How did you acquire the land then?" Clarice was off-script, but I was glad she took the initiative. I had the exact same question in my mind.

"Oh I've got some connections, mostly criminal," Terrence chuckled, "I met this kingpin sort of character. A real Al Capone type deal."

"What's his name?"

"She", it was a woman. I don't recall her name, Iris, Irene or something, Ira maybe. But she had connections into all kinds of criminal organisations. I don't know the specifics, but I paid a sum of money and they got me the land rights."

I felt my heartbeat in my ears and clenched my teeth. For the first time since Clarice started talking, I became hyper aware of the people around me, all the eyes subtly looking at me through their peripheral vision. I dropped my head slightly and stared at the floor, anger and confusion building up. My peripheral vision was still on overdrive, noticing everyone related to my situation standing completely still, while unaware people from other sections strolled by completely oblivious.

"Good thing too, I never would've gotten the factory for such a cheap price," Terrence's voice continued, but it seemed so distant, so far away as I got light headed, slightly from the anger but also from the amount of information my brain was attempting to link together, it was all so overwhelming.

I turned my head slowly in disbelief, ending my eyes on Ira. She was still facing the monitors, but her eyes were closed shut, anguish written all over her face. I stared at her for a few moments before connecting my eyes with various other intelligence agents in the room, each immediately breaking eye contact and resuming their tasks.

I turned around and took a few steps towards a quieter corner, Eduardo taking a step back to get out of my way, his head dropped to avoid eye contact. My breath was steaming out of my nose in quick but thick bursts, my teeth still clenched. Ira was at the beginning. This

organisation, the Birdhouse, everything. It was helping me undo something it had started. It was responsible.

I sensed Ira standing behind me and I turned around enthusiastically to receive her.

"You." I accused. "You are at the centre of all this. You started, ALL of this," I tried my best to maintain my demeanour.

Her head was dropped, just like everyone in the room, "I'm sorry David," she bemoaned, "but, there was more than one reason why I felt guilty for what happened."

She raised her head and met my eyes, and her face betrayed no emotion whatsoever. But her eyes. In her eyes I glimpsed the true sorrow within. Tears had collected on her lower eyelid and her eyes were red. If it weren't for her eyes, you would never have been able to tell she was even sad. Her face was chiselled to perfect contentedness. I felt the heat in my head dissipate as I saw this image of stoic professionalism cracking, ever so slightly, before me.

"I wouldn't have if I'd known. It was just business back then," Ira explained. It was my turn to look down, to break eye contact. Tears began welling in my own eyes, "this is what business is like for us," my mother was dead because of a company that was helped by my ex-girlfriend who was now helping me exact revenge, "we aren't the good guys David. We never have been."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"That wouldn't have accomplished anything. This fact doesn't change anything. I am still committing everything I have to helping you."

I stood before her as her face rapidly removed any trace of sadness that had remained. She was pragmatic. It was one of her defining qualities and probably helped her get into the position she was in now.

Ira turned around, instantly walking back towards the monitors, "Where's Ken? Ken, maintain close and active monitoring on Terrence Hatcher for the next 3 days, make sure he doesn't suspect Clarice of anything. Eduardo, get the full recordings of everything Terrence Hatcher just said down to Research. See what they can dig up. We've got a lot to work with here."

Ira was sprung into life, and the underlings scurried to obey her command.

"I know a guy," I walked back into the picture, "Tim Wright. He helped me with my campaign for the signatures. He'll be a good consultant for this."

Ira paused and just watched me. She smiled, the first smile I'd seen in a while. A genuine smile that she hadn't given me since high school. She nodded, a more welcome back kind of nod. And despite it all, I nodded back.

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## Chapter Seven

"And the Shanghai factories?" Tim, my social media campaign manager asked.

"We've established the link to his Panama account, along with most of his Eastern seaboard assets," I replied.

"I've just been in contact with the Chinese Overseer," Ira said as she walked over to the table we had surrounded, "their Shanghai contingent is on standby with the Shanghai Police. When we order it, they will take down the factories in a coordinated move with the Overseers in Brazil, Malaysia and the Balkan Bloc."

Ira turned to me, "Clarice did a good job. The list she obtained, saved us a lot of time and hassle."

"I'll be sure to send her some flowers," I said sarcastically as I returned my gaze to Tim, "so that's all his foreign assets then. 4 continents. And what about here? What about Indar Rubber?"

"Well, may I suggest employing the use of Clarice Smith once more?" Tim interjected.

"As in, turn the evidence over to her?"

"Indeed, she should have more than enough material to take down Indar Rubber and whatever assets he has left," he reasoned. It wasn't an idea I hadn't considered and was the original reason I had gone to such lengths to get Clarice on my side. However, things were quite different now, moving on a scale I had never imagined, and I wasn't sure she was capable of handling the situation, not sure if I could trust her on such a large task.

"Very well," Ira started as she turned to a subordinate, "send copies of our findings to Clarice's office by tomorrow morning-"

"Sorry to interrupt, but are we sure we can trust Clarice to such an extent?" I expressed my doubts.

"Clarice is malleable. She bends to the will of whoever is holding the stick," Tim replied, "she should be obedient." Tim was taking all this in stride. I already knew he was a fairly seedy character, but this blackmail and intrigue didn't faze him in the slightest. I was lucky to have been assigned him in the beginning.

"If you want to be sure, you can hand the documents to Clarice yourself Mr. Warren," Eduardo interjected, "this is the final killing blow, it's significant enough and perhaps she will feel the true weight of it coming from you."

"It's not a bad idea," Tim supported. It wasn't bad at all, and the showman in me thought it would be quite a cinematic experience, handing in the documents for the final manoeuvre. And I could explain the consequences of what she was going to do myself. She was afraid of me more than anyone else.

I looked at the people around me. Tim stood to my left, his casual smirk always implying that everything he did was under the guise of irony, like he was never serious. An easy excuse in case he ever said anything too controversial. To my right, Eduardo. He seemed to have been warming up to me. He had hints of doubt and a bit of poison upon meeting me for the first time, but his face now showed more acceptance whenever he was listening to me. Like he was, for the first time, actually considering what I was saying.



Across the table stood Ira. She stood with the elegance of a woman but the fierceness of one that commanded armies. Her face was stoic, betraying no emotion. Every time I looked at her, I saw the gentle girl I met in high school and the leader of an organisation of criminals, all in the same body. It was a stark contradiction, but one that worked. Her eyes were that of calm determination, the exact same face and aura that I constantly hoped to exude myself.

"I like it," I finally said, "Let's set it up."

It was another day before the preparations were ready. The copying of the files and the verification that we had what we needed—along with coordinating with the other Overseers to be on standby for our signal—apparently required much more work.

"These are all the files you need," Eduardo said as he handed a thick Manila folder over to me. It was rather subdued in its look, nothing screaming 'extensive incriminating evidence worthy enough to take down a business empire', and yet I felt the power in its weight. I held it gently, the way one usually holds something fragile, afraid that creasing the folder would somehow make its contents void. A crease being enough grounds to be thrown out in court.

"As per standard procedure, you will be in a transport with a security vehicle tailing a block or two behind," Eduardo explained.

"Should the level of security not be pumped up for this?" Tim asked Eduardo.

"I asked Ira, she seemed to be fine with it," Eduardo answered.

"Hmph, alright, you guys know what you're doing," Tim said, patting me on the shoulder.

I turned to Tim right before getting into the car, "find out what you can on Terrence Hatcher's location. I want to make sure that, if he runs, we can find him."

"Can the people here do that? Just find people like that?"

"We've," I said, feeling justified in using that pronoun, "got eyes everywhere. There's a reason it's called the Birdhouse."

"Don't worry Tim, we'll help you," Eduardo said, wrapping his arm around Tim's shoulders as he led him back into the building.

I got in the car alongside a few men, all of us dressed in fitted black suits. The men looked Armenian, or at least I thought they did. I wasn't overly sure what an Armenian looked like. The car was a sleek looking black Audi with a large front grill. I couldn't identify the make but then again, I was never good with cars. What I did know was that whenever we needed to move, it roared with quiet power. It was a pleasure sitting in it, feeling the subtle rumble of the engine.

The men were mostly silent, the men at the front sometimes saying something into their radios, probably to some control centre or the security vehicle some ways back. Once again, I contemplated what I was going to say to Clarice, an event that no longer brought me any anxiety. I was in control of the woman, and she was nothing more than a pawn in my game of chess. A pawn that I was about to use to checkmate the black king.

Once Terrence was taken down in the near future, I would need more of Tim's help. I was still the face of the protests against Indar Rubber and, as far as the public was concerned, I was still fighting the board, not aware I was now in control of its most important member. Once Indar Rubber was shut down, I could declare victory, perhaps have a press conference announcing it. I was basically like a local politician and, perhaps with a little help from the Birdhouse, I could get into a more powerful and influential position. The Birdhouse would also benefit, having an inside man in such a high position.

I barely registered the car's headlights as it slammed into the opposite side of where I was sitting, a sudden blur of movement, sounds of metal and glass shattering, momentum, the pull of the safety belt against my chest. Sudden standstill. Car alarm.

I groaned as I felt a warm trickle fall down from my hair to my cheek. I looked up, but the light was blinding. The only sounds I could hear were those of car doors opening and shouts in a language I could not understand. I rubbed my eyes and focused on regaining my composure. A sudden gust of warmer air accompanied by an increase in the light level prompted a reaction from me as I futilely tried to get away. The constriction of the safety belt suddenly released as I was pulled from the car and laid against the side.

"Mr. Warren, wake up!" A strange Turkish sounding accent told me, "wake up Mr. Warren!"

"What- what happened?" I responded just before the first gunshots rang out. Almost reminiscent of when I was shot at inside my house, the gunshots were however much louder and, instead of bullet absorbing glass, it was now crunching against metal and shattering windscreens. I felt the vibrations of the bullets slamming into the other side of the car, only an engine block and a few layers of metal between us. More shouts in the strange language. The man who was just talking to me spoke to another man in a suit, each now with guns in their hands, returning fire.

"Mr. Warren! Can you move?" The man asking but not really giving me a choice as he pulled under my arm to help me get up.

"Yes, yes I can move."

"We cover, you move to there," the man said quite desperately as he pointed at a multi-storey car park. The man had a strange accent. It was the only thing my brain was fixating on in my heightened adrenaline fuelled state. What accent was that? Where was he from? Was he Armenian?

"Can you do this Mr. Warren?" the man said once more before letting out another volley.

"Yes, yes of course. Let's go," I said as I got up into a crouched position, my head ringing, a wave of pain shooting straight up to my cranium. I just shook it off in consideration of the circumstance.

"Ok GO GO GO!" the man yelled as a volley of shots began ringing out across both sides. I got up into a semi-crouched position and then sprinted out into the open, my exposure suddenly very apparent to myself. I instantly missed the uncomfortable heat of the car, the safety of cover. For the few seconds it took to get to the car park wall, it was oddly quiet, as if there was a missing backing track. Instead, there was silence and the sounds of my feet crunching against the asphalt, some gun shots behind me, and the wind flapping one side of my suit jacket.

As soon as I reached the opposite wall however, the gun shots cracked violently against the cement of the car park. For the first time, I was able to gauge the situation. Judging from the black tire marks, our car was hit while crossing a T-junction and proceeded to spin out and stop somewhere near sidewalk. The car that hit us had a severely damaged grill and two dead men sitting in the front seats, bullet holes in the windscreen, and another two dead men just outside the car. Our car occupants didn't fare much better, the driver clearly killed by the now crumpled driver's seat, the man behind him dead in his seat, the glass also cracked from bullet holes. The man I had only moments ago been sitting next to. Further up the street, in the direction we were supposed to be going, were two cars turned to block the road, a few figures repeatedly popping up and down to fire a volley of shots.

Another wave of bullets exchanged as the man who had helped me now ran across the open space to get to my position. Just like me, it seemed like an eternity as he sprinted across, bullets whizzing past his head. He came tumbling over to me as he reached the cover I was hiding behind and resumed firing at the assailants once more.

"Rear vehicle where are you?!" the man screamed into his radio with that thick foreign accent. The other man still at the car yelled something towards us and appeared to be getting ready to run across the road. I fixated on the man's appearance again. The man was bald and looked like he was in his 30s, but his ethnicity was still a mystery to me. The man next to me stood up and began exchanging fire but quickly ducked again at the sounds of gun fire suddenly shredding the car and our bald friend. I watched as he twitched back and forth, spurts of red and black shooting out of his back, the weight of his body slamming into the car as he toppled over sideways, dead instantly.

I felt the panic set in. I watched with a sudden sense of dread as what was supposed to be our security vehicle pulled up, one of their guns still smoking from killing someone they were supposed to be providing security for.

"We gotta go!" I yelled to my only remaining ally as I pointed at the vehicle. His eyes, already wide, opened to their fullest at his realisation that we were now alone, the security we were hoping to get help from, now trying to kill us too. It was my turn to pull at him, grabbing at his forearm and dragging him along as we both ran further into the parking lot. We ran towards what appeared to be a stairwell, the only place with actual walls and not just waist high barriers.

The sounds of our pursuers turning into the car park was fantastic motivation to run faster and we only just managed to get into the stairwell before the gunshots resumed. The stairwell was covered but there lacked an actual door which meant the exchange of gunfire continued ceaselessly. I looked at my foreign friend again as he pulled out yet another magazine to load into his rifle.

"Keep us covered!" I yelled across the doorway to him as I pulled out my Birdhouse phone.

"Mexicanos!" the man yelled back.

"What?"

"Mexicanos! Mexicans!" he yelled again.

"Yes, what about Mexicans?" I questioned as I flipped open the phone.

"They are all Mexicans! Cartel! Security vehicle was also."

I gave him a look of contemplation before I began to desperately scroll through the contact list, stopping on Ira's name. Now more than ever I needed her help. I listened to the dial tone, each ringing agonizingly slow. It rang, a gunshot would rip off more cement from the already scarred doorway, and then another ring.

"Come on, come on," I began muttering to myself.

"We must go upstairs!" the man yelled to me as he hopped across to my side of the doorway, a bullet ripping straight through his stomach as he crossed. I instinctively tried to catch him with one hand as he stumbled across, not dropping the phone from my ear. He yelled in a short burst of agony but then tried to continue going up the stairs.

"Are you ok?!" I shouted in concern. The gun shots were now getting excessively loud, the wall opposite the doorway absolutely riddled with holes, the stairway railing shattered to pieces. The air smelt of burnt metal and concrete dust.

"I am ok, we must go!" he yelled back as he painfully limped up the stairs. I took his arm around my shoulder as we hobbled up the staircase, thankfully at an angle that wasn't visible from the doorway.

"Come on, come on, come on," I continued to mutter to myself as the tone dialled at its sluggish pace. What could she possibly be doing. We both stopped after ascending a single floor, the sounds of men now audible below us. My foreign friend limped his way over to the stairway railing and fired a few shots over the edge, leaving me to my phone.

"Don't you have your radio?!" I yelled at him.

"Only local channel! No connection to Birdhouse! Rouben had long distance radio," he yelled back without turning. I assumed Rouben was one of the dead men we left in the car.

"Come on, come on, pick up Ira."

"Sorry," a familiar female voice suddenly said to me over the phone, "the number you have dialled is unreachable. Please try again later."

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## Chapter Eight

I grabbed my new Armenian friend under the shoulder and helped him hobble up another flight of stairs. More bullets rang out and echoed up the stairwell, the sounds of shattered concrete falling off walls almost a constant. I looked up but couldn't see the top, partly because I was cowered closer to the walls to avoid the gunfire, but also because the building was fairly tall.

"How are you doing? You ok?" I asked him.

"Fine, fine. We must keep going," he responded through a strained voice. We reached another floor as he bent over panting. The sounds of the people below us were closer but still not visible, the occasional shots from the Armenian keeping them at bay.

"What is that?" I questioned to nobody in particular, my ears perked towards the inside of the car park. The Armenian stood up slightly and turned his head to the sound as well.

"They are driving up car park," he said finally as he started to move again, this time without my assistance. I quickly rushed over to help support him as he fired a few more rounds down the stairwell, even more inaccurate than the last time.

We reached the third floor as the sounds of the cars began resonating from the stairs above us. I felt a new tinge of sweat build up on my already wet back, my suit completely scuffed up, soot and cement caking my skin and clothes.

The Armenian was firing down the stairs, he had propped himself up against the wall and found an angle that allowed him a bit of accuracy. But the feeling was misplaced.

"They are trying to cut us off," I declared, "they think we're going to keep going up the stairs," I turned towards the car park floor itself and peeked through the doorway.

"This way!" I yelled.

As I'd hoped, the cars had driven straight past our floor and to the one above us.

"The communication between the cars and the men on the ground must not be very good," I said to an Armenian definitely not listening.

"Let's go, between the cars," I said as I grabbed the Armenian by the arm and helped him move along. The echoes of gun fire becoming slightly less overbearing as we left the stairwell. It was only now that I noticed just how much my ears were ringing.

We skulked between cars, trying to go as far as possible into the maze of parked vehicles before the men in the stairwell reached our floor. The car park floor was quite large, with large solid pillars every few meters separated by an assortment of vehicles of all shapes and sizes. I led us towards the car ramps in the hopes that we could sneak down them while the Cartel went up. Eventually, the sounds of gunfire in the stairwell ceased and was replaced by the sound of boots climbing the steps, accompanied by intermittent shouts in Spanish. With my heart pounding in my chest, we stopped and leaned our backs against a red SUV.

"What is your plan?" the Armenian asked in between heavy breaths. Why was I suddenly the one with the plan?

"We need to sneak past them, I mean, obviously, but, we need to use the ramps. They won't let us through the staircase, so we use the ramps and go down."

The Armenian just nodded painfully, sweat sheening off his face. With a little help, we both got into a crouch and started moving cautiously from car to car. From the projections of their voices, it seemed like the Cartel were splitting up, trying to cover as much of the car park as possible. I looked at my Armenian friend as sweat visibly dripped off his forehead, his pained facial expression a constant. Every small dash across an open ground and I prayed to not only be unseen, but for the Armenian to not collapse half way through. He was a real trooper. I needed to get his name once we got out of this. I was going to make sure he got all the props he deserved.

The sounds of the cars above us revving and moving down a floor was a sound I was dreading.

"Shit! They are coming back down!" the Armenian whispered in agony. We could see the ramps from where we were, only another 15 or so metres, the headlights of the cars coming down from the floor above and stopping right on the ramp.

"Fuck! They are blocking us off!" I whispered in distress to myself and the Armenian. This was not good. With Cartel blocking the stairs and watching the ramps, there was nowhere to go. I realised how helpless I was without the help of the Birdhouse and by extension Ira. I'd always known that my power was on condition, but I'd let it get to my head. That much was clear now. And as I crouched here, my knees screaming, my clothes soaked from sweat and dust, I felt powerless.

I began to shake, uncontrollably shake. I looked around through car windshields and saw two Cartel members only a dozen or so meters away from us. They were closing in our position and I didn't know what to do.

"We- we should," I stuttered, "let's pull back towards," I flustered.

Through my ringing ears and the sounds of cars reverberating through the car park, I heard a ringtone.

Pulling out my phone, I stuck my hand over the speaker to muffle the sound and looked at the caller ID.

Eduardo.

The Cartel member.

Christ, how long did it take me to make the connection? I gulped a modicum of what spit remained down my dry throat and answered the phone.

"Hello?" I asked the phone.

"David," a wave of relief washed down my body as I recognised Ira's voice on the other side, "Eduardo betrayed us, he tried to take over the Birdhouse and have you killed," she said quickly, "Terrence Hatcher works for the Cartel, they are protecting him."

I was silent as my brain ran a thousand calculations in my head at the same time, analysing every moment I had been with Eduardo, trying to see if there were any signs that I had missed.

"David," she said calmly, shaking me back into reality, "help is on the way."

I woke up, clearing my brain of any unneeded ideas. I needed to find a way out and communicate with Ira, "Ok, what should I do?"

"We've got a Yakuza sniper that has eyes on the cars at the ramp. The Sicilians are sending a chopper to the roof, it will be there in about 10 minutes — keep one team on the ground floor, the other two move up to the third floor," Ira suddenly said to somebody else in the room, her voice becoming instantly more distant as she spoke away from the phone.

"David, we have three teams being sent by the Serbians, the 18th has another three coming in but they are still a while away. When they get there, the sniper will—"

The Armenian suddenly gave a shout as his rifle released a deafening shot. I turned around just in time to see a Cartel member fall over, only a few meters away.

"We must go!" the Armenian managed to say before the car park erupted into noise, shouting coming from every direction, the Cartel zeroing in on our location.

"Ira, they've found us! Clear the ramp!"

"Sniper-1 engage now!" I could hear Ira command, once again her distant voice projected in another direction. Seconds later, a few loud cracks echoed through the car park as the windows of the cars at the ramp exploded, their occupants slumping over dead.

"David, the sniper can't see very far into the car park, you need to make your way up the ramp, he'll cover your retreat."

"Moving!" I yelled into the phone and at the Armenian as I helped him up. With one arm on the Armenian and one holding the phone up to my ear, we broke out into a crouched dash across a few more cars. Like clockwork, bullets began to fly as I felt wisps of pulverised concrete coat my throat and face. The Armenian, perhaps moving too fast and too injured, dropped the rifle as we dashed across another open space, yelling what I assumed was a foreign obscenity in the process.

"Emilia, bring up the satellite of the car park on this screen. Ken, send your two up the East side of the building," I could hear Ira command through the phone to the various people in the Birdhouse.

Running past the Cartel car, I managed to steal a glance inside. The two men in the car had slumped over, the driver's head jammed between the steering wheel and his door, the other slumped sideways towards the driver. Besides the blood and gore coating the inside of the car, my mind fixated on the fact that they still had their seatbelts on. Wouldn't a situation like this call for more manoeuvrability? Did Mexican Cartel members wear safety belts in general? I caught my mind once again fixated on a trivial detail and refocused on running.

"Tell the Italians to land the chopper on the West side. I want an update on our perimeter. All the Cartel members in the Birdhouse accounted for?" Ira continued in a non-stop tirade of orders. For the first time I was able to see how she was in charge of such a large organisation, she was a tiger, her brain seemingly focused on multiple things at the same time. The precise ferocity in her voice extremely motivating.

We didn't slow down once we reached the next floor and attempted to run the 10 or so meters to the next upwards ramp. My heart skipped once more when the concrete above my head exploded. I ducked instinctively and the Armenian and I both dove for the closest car to take cover. Cartel members had come up from the stairwell and managed to get halfway across the floor before we had gotten up the ramp. Below us, sounds of engines and more yelling began to emanate.

"We better go, they'll be up here any second," I said to the Armenian, attempting to stand up only to feel the car behind us crack and bend at the bullets ripping through the other side. I ducked and collapsed against the car once more.

"Fuck! Ira, they've got us pinned down on the fourth floor," I said into the phone.

"We've got you, sit tight. Ken, fourth floor," she responded.

The Armenian reached behind him and pulled out a pistol, pulling back the slide and chambering a round.

"You had another gun this whole time?!" I yelled.

"Yes, of course," he responded in his thick accent.

"Why didn't you give that to me when you had the rifle?"

"Have you ever shot pistol?"

"No, but-"

"Where is the safety on this pistol?" He tested me, showing me the side of the pistol.

"Safety?"

"I am not giving you pistol," he concluded, turning his attention back towards the ramp, readying for anyone that might come up.

The sounds of bullets smashing windows and crashing into metal began ramping up as the Cartel members closed in our position. The Armenian tried to fire over the car but couldn't poke his head out. I felt the car shake with each bullet as I roughly shook off the bits of glass that had fallen into my hair and pants.

"They're getting closer Ira!" I yelled into the phone. She didn't respond, either distracted giving out orders or just ignoring me.

The Cartel were close enough now that I could hear them talking to each other and I swear I could even smell them over the overwhelming scent of dust and gunpowder.

"Go!" I heard a voice yell from my left. I turned my head just in time to see two men leap over the side of the car park wall over what appeared to be grappling hooks. They landed smoothly on their feet and quickly whipped around a compact looking submachine gun that unleashed a torrent of bullets towards the Cartel. The guns buzzed loudly through the car park as they fired in extremely quick bursts, walking slowly towards the direction of the Cartel members. The men looked Japanese and appeared to be wearing some tight looking vest with small weapon magazines strapped to their chests.

I was shocked but quickly realised that bullets were no longer hitting the car we were hiding behind.

"Let's go!" I yelled at the Armenian, pulling his arm as we got up and ran towards the ramps once more, this time uncontested. Gunfire had now erupted on the floors below us as I heard Ira command different teams to position themselves throughout the car park to engage the Cartel, police sirens also audible in the distance. With one arm over my shoulder, I helped the Armenian slowly limp our way up the ramps. I could feel his strength had been sapped and, what was once an easy task of helping him rest a bit of his weight on me, was now a laborious job of holding him upright.

"Come on buddy, we're almost there," I said to his deep and strained breaths.

"David, the chopper is in a holding pattern above the car park, take a left as soon as you reach the top floor. It's an open-air roof so the chopper will just hover in place for you," Ira said quickly over the phone. I could hear the concern in her voice and felt a small sense of warmth at the sound of it. Having her in my head through all this was a speck of comfort in what was right now a sea stress and fear.

We soon reached the top and the sunlight was almost blinding in its intensity and, although I could barely see anything, I felt a sense of relief to finally be back under its warmth.

"Ira, we've reached the top floor," I said through my own heavy breathing.

"OK, sending the chopper in now."

I looked up to the sky and saw a small black helicopter begin an approach towards us. The wind was quite strong up here and I felt the air slowly drying the sweat on my face. It was almost serene. Like this whole ordeal was already over. The gunfire on the floors below had slowed down and the police sirens were getting louder but were still distant.

I readjusted the Armenian over my shoulder whose head was now slumped down, his breaths heavy. I walked him slowly over to a nearby car and sat him down on the hood.



"You're gonna be alright, you're gonna be alright," I reassured him as the helicopter closed in on us. The Armenian looked up at the helicopter and then me, breathing extremely laboriously. He'd brought me through this and I'd be damned if I wasn't going to get him through to the end. The whites of his eyes grew as he looked behind me and began a yell. I turned just in time to see a single Cartel member's raised hand, the pistol pointed straight at me. I had never put any thought into what this angle looked like, and I finally understood what 'looking down the barrel of a gun' meant. It was as if I could see the bullet itself, sitting in its chamber, waiting for me. Always meant for me.

A crack and a flash later, and I could feel the entirety of my head throbbing, an extremely tight feeling across the entire left side of my face. My ears were ringing, as if two bees were attempting to drill into both of my ears at the same time. My vision was instantly blurry, red lines criss-crossing in my field of view as the corners of my vision began to darken, like someone was rapidly turning up the dial on a vignette filter.

I heard a distant yell, the Armenian I think, as he shouted, fired a shot, and then appeared in my vision for a split second before it faded to darkness. I could hear his voice, muffled and distant, as if I was locked in a box being carted away. His voice and Ira's. I heard her yelling my first name. First name. All the time it was first name. Only person to do so. The helicopter was loudening. Louding? Louder. Getting loud. again. Not again. Is it louder or loudening? loudening. loudring. brain fixtes. brain. always.. so strnge. srng.

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## Chapter Nine

Tim took another sip from his mug as he looked off to the side. He was always slightly afraid to make eye contact with me. Possibly because I was a woman or because I was in charge of the entire criminal network for this state.

"And how did you get the file?" he asked.

"We have cops on the payroll. When police showed up on the scene, we explicitly told one to grab the file before CSI could show up."

"How did you know you could trust that cop?"

"We pay him better," I ended.

"So lemme get this straight," Tim's voice gained a bit of confidence, managing to look me in the eyes briefly before backing down again, "um, Madam Ira, uh- the Cartel was working for Indar Rubber-"

"Terrence Hatcher was working for the Cartel. Indar Rubber was just one of his companies."

"Right, Terrence Hatcher. But why? Why was he working for the Cartel?"

A tiny burst of rage sparked in my chest. Just for a tiny moment, like a single particle striking antimatter. How naive could one be? Couldn't he deduce it? I regained control and forced myself to answer.

"A rich and powerful man can become even richer if he uses illicit means to further his wealth. Terrence saw a use in using the Cartel's influence to further his gains and the Cartel saw a willing participant to work with them and make them money. It was mutually beneficial."

"Yeah, yeah that makes sense," Tim trailed off, no doubt thinking of his next question. "And yeah, so, the Cartel was working-" he caught himself, "Hatcher was working for the Cartel, and presumably the Cartel didn't want to lose a source of income, so they tried to stop the file from getting out and... take control of the Birdhouse?"

Look at that, he's capable of thought. "Yes, more or less."

"Right..." Tim trailed off once again. He was hesitating to ask his questions and I was getting impatient. I was here for a reason and if he wasn't going to take the opportunity to get answers, then I was not going to wait for him.

"Listen, I came here for a reason. Give me your account of the event. Everything you heard."

Tim took his lips quickly off the coffee mug as if he realised he was late for the bus.

"Yes, yes of course. There's not much to tell really. I was with Eduardo when we walked Warren to the car. Warren told me to follow up on Terrence Hatcher's location. He didn't want Terrence to go into hiding."

Tim fidgeted with his sleeves, adjusting his cufflinks.

"Then, Eduardo led me to a room I hadn't been before, saying I could work with a team in there to find Terrence. The room turned out to be a storage closet of some kind and he forced me to handcuff myself to a radiator pipe under gunpoint. Then he left the room and you guys found me about an hour later. Thank god as well. I was worried he was going to kill me or that I'd be stuck in there for days." Tim let out a nervous laugh which he quickly retracted, clearing his throat as an excuse.

"No, you would've been fine. Eduardo said that if he had killed people, there would've been no going back. The other organisations wouldn't have let him live."

"Smart move," Tim let out another laugh before dropping his head almost completely. The information he had was useless. Nothing I didn't know already. It only conformed with the fact that Eduardo was afraid to finish the job.

"Sorry but I am still wondering," Tim surprisingly said, "why take control of the Birdhouse? Did they really think they could get away with it?"

"As far as he's told us, the Cartel planned on seizing control of the Birdhouse long enough to stop the signal going out and to kill Warren. They had positioned themselves to block all communication going out and hold the entire Birdhouse hostage. Eduardo's insider knowledge of this place meant he knew where he had to poke to disable the place."

"Of course, until he tried to deal with you."

I suppressed a smile. An obvious attempt at flattery that I wasn't going to allow. I just burnt him with another glare forcing him back down.

"It was overzealous. And personally, I don't think they had it fully thought out. Eduardo hasn't said what the Cartel's plan was. Of course, he may still be hiding stuff from us. But the torture seems to bring things out."

Of course, Eduardo had told me his plan. His plan was to hold the Birdhouse hostage and attempt a mutiny citing my own incompetence as grounds for dismissal. He claimed that everything we were doing for David was a waste of resources and that I was abusing my position for 'personal emotional gain'. It was a bullshit reason but one that I didn't intend to make public regardless.

"Forgive me, but I've always heard that torture is not very effective?" Another question he had no business asking. Perhaps he was braver than I thought.

"It's a fairly unreliable method of information extraction," I looked back at Tim who quickly broke eye contact, "but it is satisfying."

"And Hatcher? Has Eduardo given us his location?"

I frowned and broke the smile that had unknowingly crept across my face in the middle of my previous sentence. "No, he claims to not know." And he may very well not know. But there's nothing that gives you a more helpless feeling than being tortured to give up something you literally can't. And that piece of shit can scream all he likes.

"And what about-"

"Thank you Tim," I concluded as I turned. I didn't need anything else from him and emphasised the sounds of my boots as I walked away. I had a meeting to attend.

Walking into my office, I revelled in the quiet for the first time in a while. I kept the lights off and just creaked into my chair, the back support tilting slightly under my weight. The still air combined with no windows would be seen as claustrophobic to some, but I enjoyed it. The closed space made it feel like I was deep in a cave or a coffin. A morbid thought but it helped me reflect on my own mortality. That one false move and I could end up in a box like this but six feet under. I switched on my computer and dialled into the conference call.

"-nas Stein, checking in," I heard a voice saying as I put on the headset.

"Antonio Romano, checking in," another voice said.

"Osaki Tanaka, checking in."

"Zarzant Altunian, checking in."

"Ira Park, checking in," I interjected at the next lull. A few more voices checked in before the call went quiet.

"It appears everyone is present and accounted for," a voice spoke out over the line, "I am Jacob White and I will be the moderator for this meeting. This meeting was requested by Ira Park Overseer of CIN-01W06 colloquially known as the 'Birdhouse'. Ms. Park, please proceed."

"Thank you White," I responded. My heart was beating fast, partly because these calls always involved high ranking people in the various criminal organisations, but also because I was angry. And they needed to hear it.

"As you all may have heard, there was an attempted hostile takeover of this CIN facility by the Juárez Cartel two days ago." A few murmurs broke out in acknowledgement. "We were running an operation to take down an individual who, unbeknownst to us, had deep ties to the Cartel's finances. In an attempt to safeguard this asset, the Juárez Cartel attempted to seize control of the Birdhouse and sent assassins to kill our field agents."

I deliberately paused and took a deep breath.

"This, as we all know, is unacceptable. The Juárez Cartel has been unresponsive to any attempts to contact them and, as a result of this assault, their asset has gotten away and gone into hiding. I therefore request that a Castigation be called on the Juárez Cartel until the asset we were originally seeking is brought forward to us."

Murmurs broke out once more, this time more prominent and concerned.

"The request has been heard," the moderator, White, interjected, "a Castigation on the Juárez Cartel. Are there any objections?"

"Are we sure we are not acting out of emotion?" An extremely thick Japanese accent asked. I fumed, feeling my head physically warm up.

"This has nothing to do with emotion," I responded quickly, "not reacting would set a precedence that anyone can simply assault a CIN facility with no consequences."

"I do not mean to let the Juárez Cartel go unpunished, but a Castigation?"

Another spark of anger, quickly doused, an argument forming in my head instead.

"Overwhelming retribution is a good deterrent for any future groups that decide to attempt the same thing," I reasoned, "and who among us here wishes to demonstrate that hostile actions against members of your own organisations should go unrepentant."

The call went quiet once more.

"Very well," White finally broke the silence, "if there are no further objections, the Castigation of the Juárez Cartel shall commence effective immediately. From this point onwards, all assets, abodes and personnel of the Juárez Cartel will be considered hostile and all actions towards the Juárez Cartel deemed acceptable until due justice is deemed by the Overseer of the Birdhouse, Ira Park. Thank you for your attendance."

With that, the call ended, with each representative logging off in turn. I left the call and ripped the headset off my head, dropping it onto the table in front of me. The room was still dark, and I could barely see the table in front of me, only a small sliver of light creaking through the gap below the door. It was probably just my imagination but, in the absolute silence, I swear I could hear the faint screams of Eduardo through however many doors that separated myself and him.

Terrence Hatcher was in hiding, his empire in flames, just like David wanted. But Hatcher himself slipped through the cracks and I wasn't going to leave a job unfinished. I never liked the man. Like with many rich businessmen that I have had the unfortunate pleasure of dealing with, they stunk of undeserved pride and a superiority complex. Being a woman sure as hell didn't help things. And getting to take one down off his high pedestal was a pleasure in and of itself.

I was going to find the man. I was going to pull him out of whatever hole he was hiding in, and I was going to rain unholy retribution upon whatever stood in my way. Hatcher was going to feel my wrath, and nothing was going to stop me.

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## Chapter Ten

I walked down the shattered hallway, the sunlight gleaming in through the bullet holes painting the dusty air with shafts of light. The wall was visibly thin, like cardboard. This place clearly put no effort into building standards. I wondered for a moment if I played any part in getting the permits for the construction. I walked past the body of a sicario, a cartel member, lying on his stomach, his arms coated in tattoos riding all the way up to his back, the rest hidden by his white vest. From a distance, his tattoos appeared to be some gang affiliation but none that I could ascertain. The three or so bullet wounds on his back obscured most of his body with dried blood anyway.

My heels crunched on the cement floor, stepping on chunks of the wall pulverised under the intense gunfire only moments ago. I walked past a few of my men as they inspected bodies or searched rooms. Through a plate sized hole in one wall, I saw a henchman I recognised searching through a mountain of papers and files on a desk. How archaic. In the next room, another three dead sicarios.

I was thankful to have only seen one body from our side and selfishly was thankful I didn't recognise him. My team had a makeshift triage centre set up just outside the building and I noticed a few injured being treated on my way in. This was a common sight in the past three weeks. Every lab or safehouse that we raided brought up information about other safe houses or labs, and outside each was a triage centre to aid our wounded after we finished a raid. Officially, each of these locations shouldn't have any information about other Cartel locations, however a single carelessly placed document or a sicario begging for his life brought us more information, more places to search. All to find Terrence Hatcher. It seemed everybody knew we were looking for him, but nobody knew where he was. It was the one piece of information that eluded us, and a lot of people had already died as a result.

As I walked towards the end of the corridor, I greeted Ken with a nod which he returned in kind. I walked into the room with him following behind, the P90 submachine gun tucked into his arm. I noted the small black mark on the ground marking where a flashbang of some kind went off. The room was trashed beyond repair, the walls peppered with bullet holes, the furniture tossed around, blood smeared across the ground where the bodies must've fallen and then gotten dragged out of the room. And in the centre of it all, a lone man sat in a chair, his hand tied behind the seat. His head was slouched forward with a visible rope of blood and saliva hanging off from his lower lip.

Ken walked up to the man and nodded to one of the other Yakuza in the room who painfully pulled his head back by his hair, inciting a moan from the beaten man. I walked in front of him, a slight cringe on my face as I saw the state he was in. His left eye was swollen shut, his nose and mouth bloodied with visible bruises across his face.

"Tell her what you told us," Ken said to the man.

With little hesitation, the man spoke through his injuries, "I know where he is," he moaned with a slack tongue, his chest rising and falling in quick exhausted breaths.

"Who?" I asked, to reaffirm.

"Terrence Hatcher. I know..." he trailed off, too tired to elaborate.

"Where?"

"Apartment... south side of... of the port," he said again in between breaths, his eyes not even bothering to open.

"You know that, if you're wrong, things will get much worse for you?" Ken mentioned.

"I know," was all the man could stammer out before the Yakuza let the man's head drop again.

I turned to Ken, "you know the drill, get the full address from him and send in a surveillance team. Keep him locked up until we can verify if he's telling the truth. If it turns out he's lying," I turned my head so my voice would be projected towards the half unconscious sicario, "kill him."



"Yes Ma'am, they are right inside," the driver told me as I looked out the window at the inconspicuous apartment block. It was the same height as all the other buildings and just as drab. From the outside, there was nothing special about it. Pedestrians walked past it without a glance and the cars parked out front looked like they'd been sitting there for a while. The kind of building you subconsciously ignored while looking for something on Google Street View. A perfect safehouse.

"Let's go then," I told him, sliding my earpiece into place, "Execute."

Like a well-oiled machine, one out of every two pedestrians on the street turned towards the building and converged. Two cars on the street had all their doors swung open as men in coats, their submachine guns concealed, walked towards the door. Like a stage at the end of a play, the street emptied into a single doorway, the actors exiting stage right. And quickly they went, the few real pedestrians looking confused, thinking an unusual flash mob had just occurred.

I stepped out of the car with two men acting as my bodyguards. We walked into the doorway and the bright sunshine outside suddenly ended, replaced with a dank and dark hallway, a single fluorescent light doing a poor job of lighting up the ground floor. I walked past a few rusted post-boxes overstuffed with newspapers and plastic covered magazines, the sounds of the street becoming more and more distant as we walked towards the stairs at the end of the hallway. The men had mostly all gone upstairs towards the top floor, two staying downstairs to guard the entrance. Despite the sheer number of people running up the staircase, they hardly made a sound, as if the staircase itself had headphones on, only muffled beats audible.

I walked up the stairs at my own pace, letting the men above me gain some distance as they prepared to breach the apartment. I felt the stairs fall silent and for a moment, the only sounds in the entire building were my footsteps clacking up the wooden steps. I stopped and stood still, to let the men do their work and not risk breaking our stealthy approach with my loud footsteps.

In what felt like an instant, there was a sudden explosive burst from above, shouting, silenced gun fire, then a lone voice crying out in fear.

"We've got him," a voice said in my earphone. I continued my walk up the stairs, quickening my pace in subtle excitement. I reached the top floor and saw men lining the hallway, some facing the staircase where I was coming from and others facing the apartment. The air was still dusty, the door blown open with what was apparently extremely sudden force, pieces of it lying scattered all across the floor. From within the apartment, the cries of the lone man became louder, understandable. It was a broken man begging for his life.

I entered the apartment and saw a few dead sicarios in their original positions, sitting on chairs at the dining table or in front of the TV. A few men were moving about the apartment searching rooms and checking windows but right in the middle of it stood four unmoving figures. Three were my men, silently pointing their guns straight at the final fourth figure. Terrence Hatcher.

"L-Listen, OK. I know your boss. Ira, I know her," Hatcher was trying to reason with the guns pointing at him. His face turned to relief when he saw me walk up to the circle of men around him. That was not a reaction he should be getting upon seeing me.

"Oh thank god, Ira. Please! Tell them not to shoot, I surrender!"

I stayed silent, walking right up to him instead, his only reaction being to cringe backwards. The man was not very tall and was slightly overweight. His cowardly posture probably wasn't very flattering to his perceived height. He was usually very well groomed, almost like a statue, but hiding in safehouses for the past three weeks with a bunch of Mexican gangsters doesn't allow for much accessorising.

"You have the audacity to think you have the choice of surrendering?" I asked.

"What do you want? Please, I'll give you whatever it is you want! I don't have anything left but please!"

"You Hatcher. We want you."

Anger started growing on his face, "Why?! What did I do?! Is this because of your stupid boyfriend?! It was just business! You understand that concept don't you! I didn't know he was involved with you!"

I felt my face seethe. "Sit him down," I ordered. Immediately, the henchman to my left walked over and forced Hatcher onto a chair.

"Does your little board of directors know about this? The fact that you're using all these resources, with all these people dying just for your own personal revenge quest?!" he yelled at me. "It's not even your revenge quest. It was the revenge quest of an overly emotional stupid mama's boy that isn't even alive anymore!"

I nodded along to nothing in particular. I was just letting him vent. I'd already sent the signal to send him in. I was just buying him some time to make it up the stairs.

"You think I give a fuck about some stupid old bitch in some middle of nowhere suburb enough to kill her?! It was all just business! We're all doing this for money. It's not like you don't have blood on your hands! You played a part in this remember?! You gave me the land! Where is your witch hunt?!"

I paid my dues. I made all this possible. I was at peace with my decisions.

"I'm glad that piece of shit is dead! I hope his last thoughts going through his mind before his head was blown off was of his stupid bitch mother!"

I smiled. "People do a lot of things when they feel helpless," I said in a calm tone, looking out the window instead of at him, "in the face of torture, they will try pleading first. When that doesn't work, they get angry," I turned to look him in the eyes, he looked back with an intense mix of anger that was being flooded out with anguish and confusion. "I wonder what your next emotion will be."

I could hear him walking down the hallway. It was quiet, most of my men having already left the apartment, only the three pointing their guns and two others standing around as guards. His footsteps were slow, possibly deliberate, possibly because of the cane.

He stepped through the door.



"Hatcher!" David Warren exclaimed in an excited tone, as if he'd just met a friend he hadn't seen in months, his voice still a bit gravelly from the surgery. I didn't turn around, instead opting to watch Hatcher's face drain of colour and anger as it was completely replaced by unabated fear. I slowly took a few steps back, walking off the stage for the final act. A solo performance, by David Warren.

"F-Fuck, W-W-Warr-" the poor man couldn't even complete the sentence. He tried to stand up only to be forced back down onto the chair by the henchman standing next to him. I watched as David slowly limped over with his cane, evil excitement written all over his face. From this side I could see the scar. The wound was still fresh, most of the lower left of his face covered in bandages. It made his speech difficult.

"I've been waiting, a long time for this moment Hatcher," David said as he closed the distance, his cane tapping the wooden floor with each step, like a countdown.

"You're- You're alive?! Why-" Hatcher's voice giving out at the end of the word.

"Why?" David faked a laugh, "maybe I got lucky," another step closer, "maybe my anger kept me alive," another step, "maybe," a final step positioning him right in front of Hatcher, "I just refused to die before you."

"Shi- fuc-" Hatcher's breathing was rapid, his chest rising and falling rapidly as sweat poured down his face. David's final cane tap stopped right in front of Hatcher as he looked down at his prize. He was smiling a wicked smile.

"Listen please, I didn't- I didn't know," Hatcher pleaded, trying to grab at David's shirt. David swiftly swiped his hands away and followed up with a forceful punch right across Hatcher's left cheek. Hatcher let out a loud escape of air following the crunch of the punch.

"You don't realise, just how much I've done to get to this moment," another punch across his right cheek this time, knocking Hatcher's head the other way. David's voice was filled with unfiltered emotion as it leaked out of his mouth in every direction, emphasising every word.

"How much fucking pain you've caused me." Another punch, left cheek again. The crunches were satisfying, David's hands already red and bundled up into extremely tight fists. The excitement on his face still present, but now accompanied by teeth gritting rage. He was holding back, savouring this.

"Please, I'm sorry!" Hatcher sputtered out with blood.

"If only you'd fucking known, what kind of shit you were in," another punch, the sound of bone cracking, Hatcher's head bouncing back violently. "I want you to think of all the decisions, that lead you to this chair. And I want you to regret each one." an uppercut landing on the chin, knocking Hatcher's head back violently. "I want you to wish that you'd done something differently. Anything. Just one decision and you could've avoided this," another punch, blood pooling in Hatcher's mouth at this point. "Then you'll know how I felt, as I watched my mother's coffin sink into the ground."

"P-Ple-" Hatcher stumbled out before another punch cracked against his skull.

"I had a normal life," another punch, this time to his gut, forcing Hatcher to double over before being pulled back upright by one of the henchmen on the side. "in a quiet town," another punch, David's voice starting to crack, a mixture of the surgery and the emotion welling up in his throat, "with the last person I could call family," punch. David's face was on the verge of tears, his mouth twisted sideways in sadness and grief, reliving the feelings all over again. He grabbed Hatcher's shirt with both hands and pulled him up to his face. "And you took that all away from me!" he screamed a high pitched, primeval scream.

Hatcher's hand pathetically limped in an attempt to hold David back, but his eyes were barely open, sliding off David's forearm futilely. David released a flurry of punches, one hand pulling Hatcher towards him by his shirt, the other hand punching it in the opposite direction. Hatcher's face lit up against the ceiling lights, the fluorescent lights sheening off his blood-soaked face. There were large splotches of red on the floor, some right below David. The punches were ceaseless, what started as bone crunching turned into gut turning squelches.

Hatcher could only gurgle a response through the blood, a credit to the man for managing to stay alive, let alone conscious. David finally let him go, pushing him back onto the chair. Hatcher stayed upright for less than a second, falling limp to the side and collapsing off the chair from his own body weight. David stood above him, only his back visible to me, his shoulders rising up and down from his heavy breathing.

"I hope you had a final moment of joy amongst the ashes of your empire," David whispered to Hatcher.

He turned to me, "I'm done with him."

"What do you want us to do with him?" I asked.

David raised his head and met my eyes and I saw a face I had never seen before, one twisted by pure violence and fury. There was not a single speck of kindness or that David Warren sarcasm left. The bandages had fallen off exposing the grotesque wound that lined the entire left side of his jawline. It had opened and begun bleeding in the ferocity. His hands were coated in blood and his knuckles were clearly broken, his hands stuck in fists.

"Feed him to the dogs."

And I couldn't help but be proud of him.

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## Epilogue

The wild cheering of the crowd rapidly increased in volume as David's bodyguard held open the limo door for him, instantly reducing the volume back to a murmur once he was inside with the door shut. His politician's smile breaking once he was out of the public eye.

"They really love you!" Tim said enthusiastically to the frontrunning Mayoral candidate sitting to his right. I sat across from him in the back of the limo where one row of seats faced another.

"Thank you, Tim," David responded.

"I've scheduled a meet and greet at the library next," Tim said with a big smile, "there's nothing that can win the hearts of the people quite like a disfigured man kissing a new-born baby on the cheek. Rough meets soft. That kinda thing."

"That sounds fine," David respond absentmindedly, staring out the window the entire time.

"Could you step outside for a moment? I would like to speak to Ira in private."

"Oh, uh- sure thing. Give me a shout when you're ready." Tim said as the volume momentarily increased once more as he exited the vehicle.

David continued staring out the window, his face turned revealing his scar. It hadn't healed quite as he would've liked but he had managed to use it to his advantage, claiming that the 'evil opposition' had tried to silence him. That he was not going to give up even if shot in the face. That he was brave and would always fight for the people. The people ate it up.

"Back when we were kids," he asked me, still looking out the window, "did you ever think you'd end up in a position like this?"

I took a moment to answer.

"No, not at all," I finally responded.

"If you could go back and be a normal person again, would you do it?" he asked me again. I wasn't expecting such a heavy line of questioning.

"I can't even picture any other path my life could've taken at this point," I answered. He didn't respond so I continued, "I don't think I would've been very happy with being a CEO's mistress or a starving artist."

I watched as his scarred cheek pulled back for the faintest of smiles. He turned and looked at me with despondent eyes.

"I don't know," he stuttered, looking at the floor dejectedly, taking a breath before continuing, "I don't know if I feel at peace. When I go home, I still don't turn on the lights," he looked back up at me. "It feels like I'm going to be in my house temporarily because I'm not finished. Terrence Hatcher is dead; the water is clean. But I can't shake the feeling that I still have something to do," he laid his head back against the headrest and looked around the inside of the car in idle thought. "I suppose that very clearly means I'm not at peace."

He looked back at me once more, his eyes this time welled up with tears, but his face contradictorily stoic. A practised expression, one trying to stay strong in a hard moment. His eyes betraying his true emotions however. He turned his head back to the window, his lying eyes away from me.

“If you could go back, and undo all the pain, undo all your decisions that led you down this path. Would you do it?” he asked me.

“Those decisions are what made me who I am, David.” I answered. He stayed quiet, staring out the window as a light drizzle began to streak droplets across the glass. The light from the outside began to refract against the water, painting his face in moving streams of blue light, as if his face itself was submerged. For a moment, his scar blended into the distorted light and I saw the old David Warren, the happy David Warren, back in high school. The David Warren who led a simple life, who paid his taxes and went home to his loving mother for Christmas. The David Warren I watched break down under the stress of it all and rebuild himself into the man who was sitting in that seat.

“Would you?” I asked him.

The stoic face stayed motionless, his head still turned to look out the window, a solitude teardrop streaking down his emotionless cheek.

“No,” he finally responded, “No, I wouldn’t.”

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## **About the Author**

Pejman's high school English essays consistently scored in the C- range and now he earns a living by typing code on a computer. Under many pseudonyms, he continued writing until one unwittingly took off. Now he spends his free time looking for his old English teacher on LinkedIn, hoping to finally make him proud.

## Connect with Pejman Poh

For every one of you that made it to the end of this book, thank you so much for reading! I am incredibly humbled every time a person enjoys something I create. At the time of writing this, I have no other published novels, but I have no plans to stop writing. As such, you can follow me in a few different ways:

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