

Copyright © 2025 by Michael Arturo

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover design created by Michael Arturo with the assistance of DALL-E3. Grammarly provided editorial assistance and instruction; no storyline or portion of the narrative was AI-generated, and the finished text reflects the words, ideas, and voice of Michael Arturo.

 Formatted with Vellum



For my great-grandfather, Giuseppe Pastorino, an immigrant laborer on the Chrysler Building, who fell to his death through a sidewalk opening on a Manhattan street. The ultimate New York irony—rise with the skyline, fall through the cracks.

CONTENTS

THE CITY BETWEEN US

CITY OF ORIGINS

Rose	5
Your Friends Are All Dead	13
Hell's Kitchen	25

CITY OF MONUMENTS

Skyline	43
Innocent Bystander	73
Flatiron	79

CITY OF ALLEGORIES

The Window Cleaner	97
Suttle House	107
The Six Inch Skyscraper	131

CITY OF ABSURDITIES

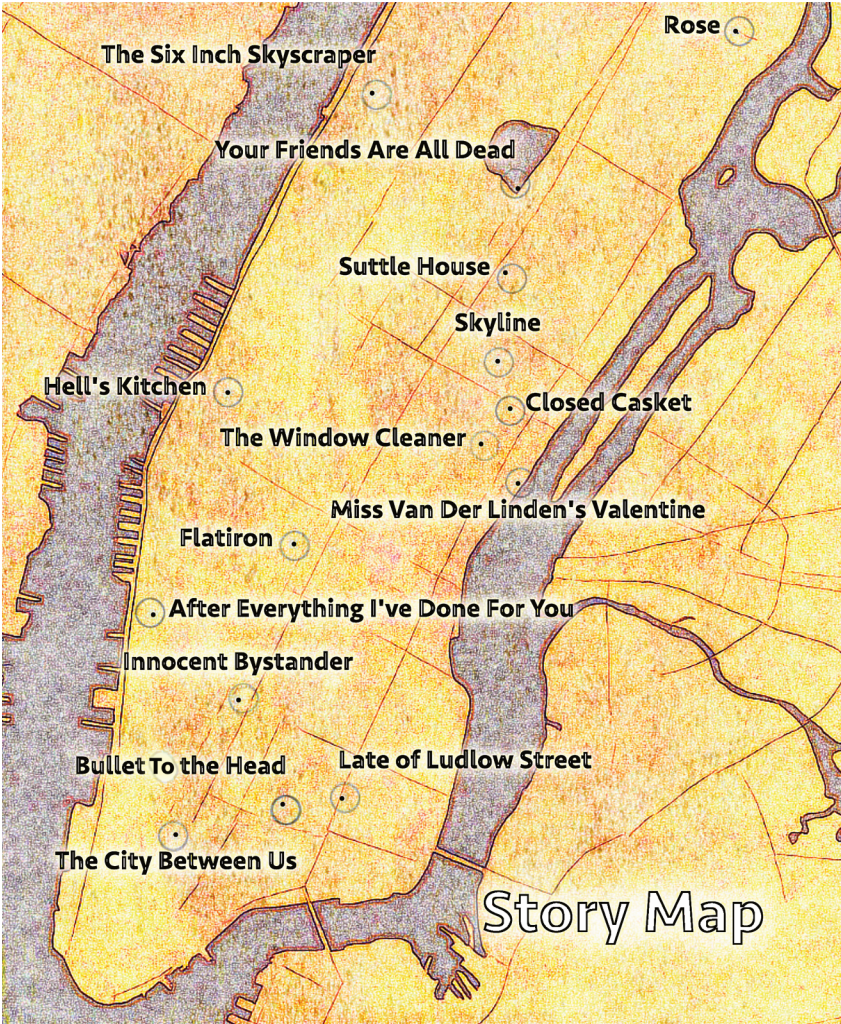
After Everything I've Done For You	149
Closed Casket	181
Late of Ludlow Street	189

CITY OF RECKONINGS

Miss Van Der Linden's Valentine	207
Bullet To The Head	217
The City Between Us	243

Afterword	267
End Notes	271
About the Author	273

THE CITY BETWEEN US



CITY OF ORIGINS

BECOMING AND BELONGING

“The moment you are born in New York, you’re different. You’re condemned to live in a city that doesn’t believe in your existence, even while it depends on you.”

(Paraphrased from James Baldwin’s essays on Harlem)

ROSE

February 2, 1981, was the midpoint between John Lennon's murder on December 8 of the previous year and the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan on March 30. This day unwittingly balanced on the fulcrum of history, suspended between the end of a countercultural icon's life and an attack that almost claimed the leader of the free world. It captured a snapshot of an America in flux, marking the end of an era where a bohemian's dreams were not just private aspirations but public manifestos, and the beginning of another where capitalism would consume everything in its path.

For 78-year-old Rose Melito, who lived a world away on 112th Street in New York's East Harlem, it was just another day, but one that would be marked by a moment of stark survival.

Rose was the matriarchal fixture of her building, her presence as constant as the Italian arias that once resonated through the neighborhood's alleys, now mostly silent but alive in her memory. A widow of several years, her children had settled far away; she lived alone but was hardly lonely, her days filled with the comforting routines that had shaped her life.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

In her modest kitchen, where the morning light draped itself over old, sturdy furniture, Rose moved with a quiet purpose. She was preparing a sauce while a voice on the radio discussed the changing face of New York.

Rose's story was intertwined with the story of East Harlem itself. Born to Italian immigrants from the Campania region of Naples who had settled nearby on 114th Street, her childhood was a medley of Italian dialects and customs. Sicilian, Barese, Genoese, Calabrese, Abruzzese, Neapolitan, and dozens of others coexisted in the largest Italian-American community in the country, mirroring Italy's regions so precisely that every street felt like a distinct village. However, as time passed, Italian culture faded, and Spanish language and culture became dominant. As she stirred her sauce, Rose reminisced about her childhood and how the Italian greetings of her youth had changed into Spanish as the community evolved.

By the 1950s, a new wave of immigrants from the Spanish Caribbean arrived in Harlem, adding to the cultural tapestry of the community. Down the hall from Rose lived the Ramirez family, whose son Javier now stood on the precipice of his own harrowing story, woven into the fabric of what became known as "El Barrio." Javier, once a bright-eyed child whose home resonated with the joyous sounds of Tito Puente's salsa rhythms and whom Rose had watched grow up, had been claimed by the streets, his potential siphoned off by the allure of narcotics.

By the 1970s, drug addiction gripped the streets of Harlem with ruthless efficiency, with heroin carving a particularly devastating path through the lives of many residents. This epidemic brought with it crime and violence, further eroding the social fabric of the neighborhood. Pimps and junkies became commonplace figures, haunting the corners and alleyways, symbols of the desperation and decay that had taken root.

Meanwhile, New York City teetered on the brink of financial collapse; its near-bankruptcy in 1975 was a stark indicator of widespread fiscal crisis. This economic turmoil exacerbated Harlem's woes as city services retracted and investments dried up, leaving the neighborhood to fend for itself against the rising tide of urban blight. By the late 1970s, Harlem was economically depleted and resembled a post-apocalyptic war zone.

In her earlier years, Rose had witnessed the smoldering unrest of what would become known as the first modern-day race riot in America. As a young mother of four, the echoes of shattered glass and the bitterness of smoke from torched buildings clouded her perception of the American Dream. The theft of a penknife was the spark that ignited an avalanche, revealing deep-seated fissures of economic and racial injustice during the Harlem race riot of 1935.

On August 1, 1943, an African American soldier intervened when a white police officer attempted to arrest a Black woman for disorderly conduct. During the altercation, shots rang out, and the soldier was wounded. Similar to the earlier 1935 riot, false rumors spread, claiming the soldier had been killed. This misinformation sparked anger, leading to another riot in the community.

In 1964, another race riot unfolded, echoing the violence of past strife and disrupting Rose's adulthood with renewed turmoil. The death of an African American teenager at the hands of a white off-duty officer reignited familiar flames of anger and helplessness.

For Rose, these incidents were not merely events; they were formative scars. She had witnessed it all and survived it, but her ultimate test was yet to come.

As Rose contemplated her morning, there was a knock at her door—a sound that felt out of place. Javier, a young man whose struggle with addiction was evident in every aspect of his being, stood at the door. Javier's presence was a heavy reminder of the trials he faced, some-

thing Rose had come to recognize all too well. Each time they met, it tugged at her heartstrings and reminded her of the boy he once was.

Their initial exchange was warm and friendly, but soon Javier's restlessness became apparent, as if he was grappling with an internal storm. Rose kindly offered him some food to take to his mother, hoping to provide a moment of comfort. Still, he gently declined, his needs running deeper than that.

With desperation in his eyes, Javier asked Rose for ten dollars—a small amount intended not for nourishment but to quiet the turmoil raging within him. Rose, with her seasoned wisdom and experience, saw through his request to the actual pain hidden underneath. Her refusal carried the weight of sorrow and understanding; it reflected her grief for the innocent child she had once known, now ensnared by the claws of addiction.

Saying no was not easy; it was a somber acknowledgment of who Javier had been before addiction overshadowed his life. In those fleeting moments, as Javier wrestled internally, his resolve began to fade. The whispers of hope were quickly drowned out by the powerful lure of the drug he craved. In a fit of despair, he pulled out a gun, his hand trembling—an embodiment of his inner conflict.

Javier claimed he needed it for protection and assured Rose he would never use it against anyone. But when she asked him to relinquish the weapon, he tightened his grip, pointing it toward her. At that moment, the weight of his brokenness was palpable, as the cold metal represented his deep-seated fears and desperation. It pointed at Rose, a symbol of his lost past, while the enormity of his choices bounced around in the corners of his mind—a haunting reminder of the joyful child who once laughed in those very halls.

What unfolded in that narrow hallway was more than just a tense encounter; it was the intersection of their shared history and a stark

reflection of the paths they had taken. Rose, standing steadfastly, no longer saw a weapon pointed at her but rather the shattered dreams of a child she had nurtured.

As their eyes locked, Javier's gaze flickered between the stark reality of his situation and the outstretched hands before him—his reaching out for understanding, hers poised in readiness to protect and offer compassion. In that vital moment, Rose acted. Though her hands bore the marks of age, they moved with unexpected agility. She firmly grasped the barrel of the revolver, utilizing the surprise of the moment.

Years of resilience and determination had forged Rose Melito's hands into powerful tools. When faced with Javier's threat, her instincts kicked in, and she twisted the gun away from him, finding strength in an unexpected place. Before he could even react, her swift fingers snatched the weapon from his grasp, proving that age does not limit one's ability to stand strong.

Holding the gun felt unfamiliar and served as a heavy reminder for Rose. Yet, in a moment fueled by instinct and resolve, she prepared to deter him by firing a warning shot. The loud crack of the gun echoed in the air, shattering the tense silence around them. But in a cruel twist of fate, the bullet missed its intended target, allowing for a moment of reflection amidst the chaos.

Instead, it struck the time-worn marble floor that had been laid by Rose's Italian forebears generations before, and from there, it ricocheted wildly. A stray fragment of the bullet found its mark in Javier's neck, piercing his jugular and severing his life force as swiftly as a shadow passes. He fell to the ground, life ebbing away in an instant.

Rose stood silent, a pillar of resolve amidst the chaos, her house dress marred with Javier's blood. She had intended only to defend

herself, but now bore the heavy burden of having taken a young life, even if by a tragic accident.

The aftermath was a silence that spoke louder than any gunshot could. Javier lay still, and Rose stood with the gun heavy in her hand, not as a weapon but as a weight of a hundred years of history. Her action was not one of malice but of tragic necessity, the final act of a drama that had begun decades earlier on the very streets that had promised hope to so many.

Rose quietly returned to her home and laid the weapon on the kitchen table. She called the police and, with a suddenly trembling voice, told them she had accidentally shot her neighbor's son. Then she sat in the living room, looked out the window, and waited for them to arrive.

Rose Melito was a product of her environment, forged in the melting pot of New York City—a woman whose life was a testament to the strength and resilience required to navigate the complex web of community, culture, and survival. Her story, along with that of Javier Ramirez and all those who had made East Harlem their home, encapsulated the truth of the human condition: the struggle, the pain, the fleeting moments of joy, and the enduring hope for redemption.

And so the legacy of 112th Street continues, a narrative written in the stoic faces of its inhabitants, in the silent prayers whispered in the church pews of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in the clinking of glasses at Rao's Restaurant, and in the echoes of Italian and Spanish words that have danced through the streets like leaves in the wind. It is a story that does not end with a gunshot but lives on in the hearts of those who remember what East Harlem was, what it has become, and what it will always be—a symphony of stories, a chronicle of humanity.

As the Reagan years unfolded, their tapestry of change was woven with threads harsh and unyielding to those like Rose Melito and Javier Ramirez. The social safety nets that once cradled the most vulnerable were frayed and cut, one by one, in the name of fiscal austerity and a free-market crusade. With her widow's income and an old-world reliance on community, Rose found herself navigating an increasingly alien landscape.

For Javier, already tangled in the throes of addiction, the Reagan era's escalation of the War on Drugs was waged not against narcotics themselves but against people like him—those struggling with addiction who were often victims as well.

By the mid-80s, Rose and Javier would have become relics of a bygone era—she with her ties to a community being eroded by change, he with his afflictions worsened by policies that punished rather than rehabilitated. The fabric of life that had made a place like East Harlem home was unraveling, along with the last vestiges of existence for those unable to adapt to the harsh new reality that was emerging.

February 2, 1981, was a mere 56 days since the world had reeled from the murder of John Lennon, and 56 days before an emboldened hand would attempt to alter the redesign emerging under President Ronald Reagan's America. It was a day that stood as an equinox between the tragedy and turmoil of epoch-defining events. Though worlds apart, it was a day that marked a fateful turn in the lives of Rose Melito and Javier Ramirez, who both resided at 112th Street and Pleasant Avenue in East Harlem.

YOUR FRIENDS ARE ALL DEAD

Rockefeller Center shimmered with Christmas lights, the tree glinting with a million cold stars. The crowd—mostly tourists—stood rapt, their breaths clouding the air, cameras raised to capture an illusion of joy. Carols wafted from hidden speakers, and the skating rink below was a frozen stage of laughter and oblivion. Nearby, chestnuts crackled in a vendor's brazier, black and oily smoke curling up toward the dark sky.

Antoine Delacorte waited by the edge of that scene, a man out of place, though his camel-hair coat fit the season. His eyes flicked over the glow of lights, the brass angels frozen in heraldry, the unblemished ice. The world used to be this clean, this manageable. He used to understand it. Now, it was slipping.

"Antoine," a steely-thin voice from behind beckoned.

Antoine turned. Phillips stood in a dark overcoat, cloaking him like a shadow-given form. His collar was up, shielding his face from the cold—or the world. His eyes glimmered flatly; there was nothing

warm in them. Smallish in stature, Phillips had a way of talking down to others who towered over him.

“Thanks for coming,” Antoine said, his tone practiced but brittle.

“We don’t know each other, do we?” Phillips said ironically, before settling over a railing to watch the holiday ice skaters. “There are lip readers everywhere.”

“No need to worry. We’re good.”

Phillips took a deep breath and clasped his hands in a mock gesture for warmth. “The holiday season, hah? I used to bring my kids here to skate! Years ago. We were living in Murray Hill at the time. I had a job working the night shift at some fleabag hotel in Midtown. Every Christmas—the wife and kids—Rockefeller Center, Christmas mass at St. Patrick’s.”

Phillips’s gaze swept the scene before continuing, “That was all before I got busy cleaning everyone’s mess. Not that I’m complaining. I needed to turn a buck. Opportunity knocked. Then everything went upscale. Turned out, the more upmarket, the deeper the rot.”

Antoine and Phillips shared a faint smile before he continued.

“What memories, though. All the holiday display windows on 5th Avenue.”

Phillips then tilted his head toward Antoine, “All that joy, and then comes one of those bothersome inconveniences someone needs to be scrubbed from prying eyes.” Antoine stiffened.

Phillips then fixated briefly on the vendor’s grill as the fire spat sparks into the air, embers swallowed by the cold. “I usually don’t do meetings near open flames, Antoine.”

Antoine’s throat tightened. The heat, the acrid smoke, the roasting chestnuts all clawed at something raw in him. He pushed it down. “I need assurances,” he said.

Phillips raised an eyebrow. The cold made the motion sharper. “*Ya do?* That’s funny, I thought we were just talking.”

“The Times, the Feds, all of it. *I want it all to stop.*” Antoine’s eyes darted over Phillips’s face, searching for a flicker of commitment, of sympathy. He found nothing. “Isn’t that what you do?”

“Says who? What I do, any schmuck on any street corner in Manhattan can do.”

“Right,” Antoine checked, “Okay.”

“I realize I’m half your size and it’s Christmas, but how did I get cast as your magical elf?”

“You *are* a magical elf,” Antoine laughed.

“Which reminds me: I’ve got to get to Radio City again. Did your father ever take you to Radio City when you were a kid?” Phillips asked with a half-smile.

“Yeah, of course.”

Phillips’s gaze lingered on the rink below, thoughtful. “Funny how we circle back. Things we swore were only for kids—that we’d outgrown—and then one day we catch ourselves wanting to do them again.”

“I think that all the time.”

“I admired your father, Antoine. I’ve told you that more than once. He was a great man. Applied the right pressure to the right people to make the right moves. Black Harlem’s great kingmaker. Opened doors for people of color before it was a thing. Everyone, including his only son. What was that he used to say? ‘*Control the wind and you control everything.*’”

Phillips exhaled, breathing a white wraith into the air. “But now ... the winds have shifted, the world is what it is. You leave a crack open

—they shine a light into every corner. If they're not looking for something, they're looking for anything. The Times, the Feds, all of them."

Phillips's words dropped like a lead weight. Cold, immovable.

"Your friends are all dead, Antoine."

Antoine's jaw twitched. He knew it was true. The web he'd spun for years—the deals, the quiet favors—was gone. Burned away or drowned. The alliances were dust. He had no friends left, just names on warrants and cold shoulders in corridors.

Phillips paused and sucked his teeth; his tone shifted colder. "I can't resurrect the dead. If I start digging up graves, I might as well dig my own. So let me spell it out for you best I can: I can't do anything for you that you can't do for yourself."

His eyes narrowed. "Where's Amelia on this?"

Antoine shifted, his weight moving from one foot to the other. The answer hovered in the cold air, unspoken.

"Yeah," Phillips said, his voice flat. "It's not like you're the first public official to take a walk on the wild side. Everyone dabbles in temptation. Some hang, others slip the noose. Elliot Spitzer, Anthony Weiner, Bill Clinton. If your wife's still in your corner, you can shimmy out of this. Water off a duck's back. *But she's not, is she?* Who could blame her?"

The words sliced deeper than they should have. Antoine's stomach twisted.

"Not for nothing, but an unwanted pregnancy tends to kill one's chances at redemption. And the girl—how old was she?"

"*Stop!*" Antoine snapped, his voice cracking with desperation.

“You’re on your own,” Phillips said, his voice low and final. “You’ll have to act like it’s the end of the world, as everyone expects you to. Walk the plank and hope you can get to dry land before the sharks eat you alive.”

Antoine’s eyes flashed, a glimmer of heat behind the ice. His lips curled back.

Phillips’s expression snapped tight. “I should add a zero to the number you think I’m worth just for meeting you in public,” he said. His teeth clicked on the words, each syllable a spark of flint.

The space between them thickened, crowded with things unsaid. The fire from the chestnut vendor hissed nearby, flames licking at the air, casting warped shadows. The laughter from the rink below floated up and echoed around them.

For a moment, the world narrowed. Antoine’s vision sharpened. He imagined stepping in, grabbing Phillips by the back of his head, driving his face into the grill. The fire would bite, the skin would sizzle, and the chestnuts would burst. The thought was a rush of heat in his frozen veins.

Phillips’s voice jolted him back in. “*Fight this! Look at me, Antoine!*”

Antoine blinked.

Phillips paused before adjusting his gloves, each motion deliberate, “I’ve known you a long time. Focus. Don’t just go through the motions. Look them dead in the eye and own it. And, for God’s sake, don’t do anything stupid. People in this town turn the page faster than anywhere.” Phillips paused again, something flickering in his eyes—a shadow of pity, maybe, or just caution. “Time will tell.”

“And if it tells me nothing?” Antoine asked, voice ragged.

Phillips shrugged, the gesture smooth, dismissive. “Then you’re not the story.”

Phillips spoke without turning his head before disappearing into the night's anonymity. "This conversation never happened."

"The Little Drummer Boy" drifted from the sound system as Antoine watched Phillips disappear into a crowd. Antoine's gaze shifted to the towering Christmas tree looming over the ice rink, its lights like a thousand unblinking judges. The cold gnawed at his cheeks while the fire behind him hissed and spat, and the chestnuts cracked open with soft, wet pops.

Antoine turned up the collar of his coat and headed home. Fifth Avenue stretched ahead, the eastern edge of Central Park, dark and indifferent.

He walked briskly, his shoes slicing through the thin veneer of snow left untrampled by the crowds. The air was sharp and clean in a way that mocked the dirt swirling beneath the surface of Antoine's life.

Carriages rattled by, horses' breath hanging in clouds, the bells on their harnesses jingling. Tourists clung to each other under blankets, their eyes wide with the magic of the city's curated romance. The illusion held. Barely.

Antoine reached the edge of the park and hesitated. The city behind him buzzed, and the quiet pressed in like a held breath. He could still hear Phillips's words, like an echo of his father's advice twisted into something darker.

His shoes crunched against the ice-crusting path as he made his way toward a place that used to feel like a sanctuary. Conservatory Water lay ahead, a man-made pond inspired by Paris's Grand Basin in the Luxembourg Gardens. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux had crafted it for quiet joys—children guiding model boats, adults basking in small, controllable pleasures.

In the winter, sometimes the pond opened for ice skating. Tonight, it was frozen over, an unbroken pane of ice reflecting the faint glow of

the city beyond. He paused at the edge, the cold air biting at his face. On the glassy surface, he could almost see the past.

A boy in a pressed coat, small hands grasping a model boat's tiller. His father's firm hand guided his own. *Control the wind, Antoine, and you control everything.* The words had the gravity of law, softened only by the warmth of paternal pride.

Now, the wind was beyond his control and everything else with it. The pond was a slab of ice, the world an unwelcome riddle he couldn't solve.

A shout broke the stillness. Antoine turned his head.

Two figures lurched out of the darkness near the Alice in Wonderland statue. Their movements were jagged, raw—shoulders hunched, fists clenched. Even in the dim light, he could see they were roughed up like they'd dragged each other through a fight neither had won.

Antoine's feet moved before he decided to follow. He drifted closer, their words filtering through the freezing air—splintered threats, vulgarities that cracked like whips. He could feel the heat of their anger, wild and untamed, searing through the cold.

Then one of them pulled a gun.

The metal glinted, absurd and brutal against the snow-blanketed ground. Antoine's pulse roared in his ears. He stepped forward without thinking, his voice rough.

"Hey! What's going on here?"

The words hung in the air: fragile, doomed. The man with the gun twisted around, his face a mask of surprise and fury. The muzzle swung up, a tremor of hesitation, then—

The shot exploded.

A punch of heat seared Antoine's side. He staggered back, the world tilting as pain clawed through him. His heel slipped. The ice caught him, held him. His back struck the frozen pond with a sickening thud.

He lay there, gasping, the cold pressing into him as warmth spread out from his side. Dark and sticky blood seeped across the ice, a grotesque bloom against the pale surface. He tried to move, but his limbs felt distant, unresponsive.

The two men were gone. Footsteps pounded away, swallowed by the dark. The night closed in, indifferent, as if nothing had happened.

Time stretched, warped. The pain pulsed in waves, hot and cold. His breath misted above him; each exhale thinner than the last. He blinked up at the sky—empty, uncaring.

Control the wind, Antoine, and you control everything.

His father's voice slid into his mind, clear as glass. He could see it again—the bright summer sun glinting off the water, the model boats gliding smooth and perfect. His father's hand, steady and sure, resting on his shoulder. The sense that everything made sense, that control was just a matter of will.

But control was an illusion, wasn't it? He had thought he could steer his life, his career, his reputation. And yet here he was, bleeding out on a sheet of ice, his life spilling away under a sky that refused to acknowledge him.

The cold gnawed at the edges of his mind. He tried to hold onto the memory—his father's warmth, the shimmer of summer, the promise that he could master the wind. But the ice was real, the blood was real, and the dark was closing in.

Sirens. Distant, at first, then louder. A frantic chorus echoing through the trees. Red and blue lights splintered the dark. Shadows moved around him—voices, hands, urgency.

“Over here! We’ve got him!”

A face leaned over his, sharp and pale with concern.

“Stay with us, Mr. Delacorte. You’re going to be okay.”

The words sounded ridiculous, as if they belonged to someone else. But he clung to them. The wind had slipped from his grasp, the world had tilted beyond his control, but somewhere beneath the ice, life still pulsed.

As dawn edged the sky with faint light, they lifted him off the frozen pond. The bloodstained ice lay behind, slowly fading under a new layer of snow. The city stirred awake, ready to forget the dark.

Antoine Delacorte, propped up in bed in his Upper East Side condo, the dull ache in his side a constant, nagging reminder that his life had shifted in ways he couldn’t yet comprehend. The late morning sun filtered through the curtains, painting pale stripes across the room. His glass of water sweated on the nightstand, condensation pooling around its base. The air was still, too quiet, save for the low murmur of the television.

The news anchor’s voice drifted into the room, bright and polished.

“...once engulfed in scandal, Antoine Delacorte is now being embraced as a symbol of resilience and bravery. Shot in Central Park after intervening in a violent confrontation, Delacorte survived hours on the frozen pond before help arrived. Public sympathy has surged, and many are calling his recovery a second chance not just for him, but for the city’s faith in its leaders...”

He turned his head slightly, watching the screen with a strange detachment. There he was, frozen in a still image: pale, wounded, eyes glazed but determined as he was wheeled into an ambulance.

The narrative had rewritten itself. The mud of his scandal had been papered over with a thin veneer of heroism.

The phone on his nightstand buzzed a low vibration against the wood. He glanced at the screen: *Phillips*.

He picked up, pressing the phone to his ear. "Hey! I thought I'd hear from you sooner or later."

A pause, the kind that seemed deliberate. Then, that familiar voice, gravelly and understated. "Me? Nah. I never call anyone. Anyway, how are you doing?"

Antoine exhaled a laugh that hurt more than it should. "I'll make it."

"Good. Listen, don't get too comfortable with the folk hero bullshit. They can reverse field just as quickly."

The familiar cynicism grounded him, oddly comforting. "I know."

A pause stretched between them, weighted, heavy with things neither had ever said out loud.

"If you need anything, you know who *not* to call," Phillips said ironically. His voice was steady, but something else threaded through it—something brittle.

Antoine smiled all the same. "Thank you. I mean it."

"Don't thank me," Phillips replied, dismissive. "I didn't pull you off of that ice."

Antoine frowned, a question forming, but Phillips cut him off. His voice softened. "Good luck in November."

The words landed awkwardly, too final. A warning bell rang faintly in Antoine's mind. "I should tell you... I'm not doing too well," Phillips confessed.

A sigh. Not the kind born of exasperation but resignation. “I’m sick, Antoine. I might not be here to see November.”

The words hung in the air like frost, stealing warmth from the room. Antoine’s fingers tightened around the phone, his throat constricting. “No... I didn’t know.”

“Not everything’s about you.” Phillips chuckled softly, but the humor was hollow. “Don’t worry about it. Focus on what you’ve got left to do. You can make a difference, Antoine. I mean that.”

The line was nearly dead when Phillips’s voice returned, low and deliberate.

“Your father used to tell me, people gripe about politicians like they’re owed saints. But they’re not. We get men cut from our own cloth. That’s the bargain. I think about your father often. What he did for me... I’ll never forget.”

The call ended.

Antoine lowered the phone slowly, his hand trembling. The room seemed colder, the sun’s light stripes now sharp and accusatory. He stared at the phone as though willing Phillips’s words to rearrange themselves, to mean something else. But they were fixed, immutable.

I think about your father often.

It was a phrase laden with more than gratitude—it was legacy, loyalty, an acknowledgment of debts paid and promises kept. His father’s shadow loomed large once again, threading through his present, binding him to a past that continued to shape everything.

On the television, the news continued.

“...Delacorte’s political future is uncertain, but his resilience is winning over hearts across the city. As November approaches, many wonder if this near-tragedy will be the turning point...”

THE CITY BETWEEN US

He reached for the remote and muted the sound. The room settled back into stillness. He leaned his head against the pillow, the ache in his side pulsing with his thoughts.

Phillips might not make it to November. But Antoine could. And maybe, just maybe, he could carry something of Phillips with him—a final act of redemption, a chance to prove that the wind could still be steered, even when it seemed most out of control.

He closed his eyes, just for a moment, and let the weight of the city, his father, and Phillips settle over him.

HELL'S KITCHEN

Leonard Greaves had always believed in the sanctity of records. For over four decades, he meticulously archived the city's history with the now-defunct *New York Chronicle*. Now, at 72, retired and ailing, he found himself surrounded by the very artifacts he once curated—newspapers, microfilms, and clippings that chronicled the relentless march of time.

His apartment in Hell's Kitchen mirrored his mind: cluttered, organized chaos, but every item had its place. The neighborhood, once gritty and unforgiving, had softened over the years, but Leonard remained unchanged—a relic of a bygone era.

On this particular evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Leonard sat hunched over his microfilm reader. The soft whirring of the machine was a comforting lullaby, a constant in an ever-changing world. He fed the film through the reader, eyes narrowing behind thick glasses as headlines from decades past flickered before him.

But something was amiss.

He paused, scrolling back to a headline that shouldn't exist:

Terror Strikes WTC: Thousands Feared Dead

The date read: *September 11, 1998*.

He blinked. Scrolled again. Checked the date twice, then three times.

It wasn't a formatting error. The issue layout matched the *Chronicle's* standard edition from that period. The byline belonged to a reporter he remembered fondly, long dead from cancer. There was even an image: one of the towers collapsing, grainy and gray.

Leonard gripped the edge of the table.

In 2001, he had been in Midtown, standing outside the Chronicle building when the sky tore open. The smoke, the dust, the smell. That was real. He knew it. And yet—this version claimed it happened three years earlier. A full article. A timeline. Quotes from witnesses, fire chiefs, mayoral statements. All of it.

He rubbed his eyes and walked a slow circle around his apartment, mumbling to himself. His place—cramped, cluttered, quiet—offered no explanation. Just towers of yellowing clippings, shelves of labeled microfilm, file folders stretching back to the Ford administration.

He searched for surrounding stories, the days before and after the 1998 article. Nothing unusual. No corrections. No retractions. But the more he looked, the more inconsistencies revealed themselves: a bombing in Jerusalem that he remembered as 2003 appeared dated 1996. A subway derailment he could've sworn happened in 1989 was now listed in 1991.

He sat down. Stood up again. Paced.

At the *New York Chronicle*, he was the man who caught the details before they became disasters. Misplaced datelines, inverted headlines, captions that didn't match their photographs—Leonard

HELL'S KITCHEN

spotted them all. In the newsroom, he was half archivist, half oracle, with a memory so precise his editors trusted him over the masthead.

“You don’t miss a thing, Greaves,” his managing editor once told him, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “You’re the last line of defense between the truth and a typo.”

But nothing in his decades of work had prepared him for this.

In an act of desperate logic, Leonard turned to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—the first attack. He remembered it clearly. Six people dead, a truck bomb in the garage. He had clipped and archived those stories himself.

He checked the reels.

Nothing.

Not a mention. Not a headline. Not even a weather report for that week. The gap was silent, like someone had cut it clean out of the record.

Then the lights in his grim little apartment flickered.

He froze.

A moment passed. The generator he’d installed—buried somewhere under old stereo boxes and city permits—hadn’t kicked in. Not yet.

And then the apartment fell into darkness.

Leonard cursed and fumbled for a flashlight. He couldn’t find it. The backup batteries were gone, the drawer empty. He moved through the dark like a man underwater, bumping into his own archives.

Outside, he heard a door creak open—soft footsteps in the hallway.

“Anyone there? What happened to the lights?”

Then a neighbor’s voice, sweet and low:

“Leonard? Is that you?”

“Who’s that—Louis? Louis, is that you?”

“Leonard, the whole city’s out!”

“Blackout?” Oh, Jesus, I thought I was going crazy. Louis, thank God you’re here!”

Leonard squinted into the dark. A faint beam of cell phone light illuminated the figure of Louis—or rather, Loretta, dressed in a shimmering lavender blouse, black slacks, and a matching clutch purse tucked beneath her arm.

Her makeup was done with precision—lipstick, false lashes, contour. She was beautiful, poised, entirely herself. But every time Leonard saw her like this, he felt a curious dissonance, as if the hallway were a mirror turned sideways.

“Oh. You’re dressed,” Leonard said, breathless. “You scared me.”

She stepped closer, the phone casting ghostlights across her cheekbones. “You can call me Louis, I don’t mind. Was just heading out when the blackout hit,” she said. “Lost my phone signal. Thought I heard your door.”

Leonard squinted, “The whole city’s out? When did this happen?”

“Just now.” Loretta tilted her head, smiling gently.

He managed a nod. “Oh my God! Well, listen: help me find my generator, would you? It’ll only take a minute.”

Together, they fumbled through his stacks, shoulder to shoulder. Leonard barked directions; Loretta ignored them and found the unit in five minutes flat. Once the generator sputtered to life, dim emergency lights returned to the room. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to see each other.

Leonard, grateful and shaken, gestured toward the kitchen.

HELL'S KITCHEN

"No one's going anywhere until the city figures this out. Do you want something? I'll make tea."

They sat at the small table, mismatched mugs in hand. A candle flickered between them, casting long, slow-moving shadows on the wall.

"Ever been in a blackout like this before?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. Twice, maybe three times, I think. 2003 was the last one," Leonard replied. "New York was down all night."

Loretta chuckled. "You mean 2000?"

"2000?"

"The millennial blackout? You don't remember?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, of course. When was that?"

"2000."

"Yeah, I know. But when precisely?" He frowned. "I'm sorry; what do you take with your tea?"

"Nothing, plain. Thank you. Anyway, that blackout—I was ten," she said, laughing slightly. "Living in Ohio with my parents. Saw it on the news. We thought the world was ending."

Leonard said nothing. Took a sip of tea.

She noticed.

"What?" she asked.

"No, no, no. I was recalling ... when ..." Leonard's voice trailed off as he stirred his tea. "Listen, um, Louis, I didn't mean to, um, insult you before by calling you Louis."

"You're not insulting me. You know me as Louis. We've been neighbors for a while, Leonard. Come on."

“Well, all right. You *pass* ... very well.”

“Thank you. I work at it.”

“Oh. Well, *Loretta*.”

“Yes, Leonard?”

“Nice to have a little company during a blackout. Wonder how everyone else in the building is doing.”

Loretta looked around the place, “Wow, you’re quite a collector.”

“Yeah, did you know? Maybe I’ve never told you, I’m a ... I worked for the *New York Chronicle*; the paper went under a few years ago.”

“I never heard of it.”

“Well, that’s what you see all around you here.” Leonard gestured vaguely at the stacked microfilm reels, the paper towers leaning like exhausted sentinels. “Catalogues. Dates. Clippings. Back issues. It looks like a mess, but I know where everything is. I spend most of my time going back. Checking for accuracy.”

He gave a short, bitter laugh. “This is what I do. It passes the time.”

Loretta smiled at him—not amused, not pitying, just present. That was what made her different. She didn’t fill silence with noise. She listened like someone who’d had to fight to be heard.

Leonard hesitated, then asked: “Do you remember... the attack on the World Trade Center?”

She blinked. “Who doesn’t? You mean 9/11, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I was about eight or so. I watched it in homeroom. The teacher rolled the TV cart in. We didn’t even understand what we were looking at.”

Leonard's face paled.

"So you're saying you remember that *before* the blackout?"

"You mean in 2000?" she asked. "Sure. I was a kid, but yeah."

Leonard's tea rattled slightly in his hand.

"Leonard..." she said softly. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just... my memory."

"You sure?"

He stared down into the tea like it could offer him a clue. "I had a good one. At the Chronicle, they trusted me to remember what the rest forgot. Dates. Layouts. Whenever someone else couldn't find the thread, they would come to me. My mind was the vault." He tapped his temple gently. "It was the only thing I had that was... *sharp*."

Loretta took a sip and leaned back, relaxing her posture.

"Tell me about yourself," Leonard said, changing his tone.

"I came to the city when I was twenty-one," she said. "Worked coat check at a cabaret on 10th. A *shit-hole*, *really*! They used to call me '*darling*' and let me borrow dresses after hours. I'd walk home like that. Past cops. Past drunks. Past old men who looked at me with a kind of confused wonder."

Leonard smiled faintly. "Like you'd stepped out of a dream?"

"Or into one."

He nodded slowly, staring into the soft flicker of the candle between them.

"You'd have loved New York before Giuliani cleaned it up. Before Bloomberg handed it over to the bankers. It was dirty. Raw. You could still vanish in it. In some ways ..."

He trailed off.

Loretta cocked her head. "In some ways—what?"

Leonard's voice was low, more breath than speech.

"We called men who cross-dressed *transvestites*."

"Who did?"

"I did. Everyone did."

A silence expanded between them before Leonard spoke.

"There was a place here in Hell's Kitchen. The Mercury Lounge. Working class during the week, then on the weekends, something different. One Saturday night, I was ... I met someone. And we fell into conversation."

Leonard suddenly stopped, "I thought she was a woman."

"Oh, interesting."

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. We drank, we talked politics. She was brilliant. Confident. And she looked at me like she could see something worth keeping."

"What happened?"

"I kissed her," he said, eyes glassy. "I didn't mean to. Or maybe I did. And she didn't stop me. Not at first. Later... I don't remember if it was before or after, but she told me her name wasn't what she'd said. That she wasn't what I thought."

Loretta was still. Her expression unreadable.

"I left," he continued. "Panicked. Didn't ask her real name. Just walked out like a goddamn coward. Like she'd shown me something sacred, and I spat on it."

Silence expanded between them.

"You wanted to stay," Loretta said gently. "But you didn't know how."

"Yes," he whispered. "And I've been trying to rewrite it ever since."

Their eyes met.

She touched his hand across the table—warm, deliberate, genuine.

"That night didn't disappear just because you walked away."

He nodded slowly.

But something in him changed, like a current turning under still water.

"What if that night was the break?" he said, voice cracking. "What if that moment *rewrote* everything after it?"

Loretta's brows drew down slightly.

"What do you mean '*rewrote*'?"

He stared at her now—not at her dress or makeup or the softness in her voice—but through her. It was as if he was seeing something overlaid on her skin.

"Does that mean you did follow her?" she asked cautiously.

His mouth opened, then closed.

He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. The tension in the room thickened, not from anger, but from recognition. A corner turned inward.

"When you spend your life organizing history, the last thing you want is a memory you can't place," he murmured.

Loretta tilted her head. "What are you saying?"

Leonard didn't answer right away. He stood, walked over to his desk, and stared at the blank screen of his microfilm reader as if some-

thing might return to it. Then he exhaled slowly, eyes still fixed forward.

“I’ve been chasing inconsistencies,” he said. “Dates that don’t match. Events that don’t exist. Things I *know* happened... but are gone from the record.”

Loretta shifted in her seat, her demeanor softening slightly—until Leonard finally turned to her, and there was something new in his expression. Not just confusion but dread.

“I think it started with her,” he whispered. “That night. I don’t mean her personally. I mean what I did, what I didn’t do. I filed that night away like a mistake. But it wasn’t. It was... it was *real*. And I think the world punished me for burying it.”

Loretta didn’t interrupt.

Leonard stood again, slowly walking to the microfilm cabinet. He opened it, pulled a reel, and slid it in. The machine sputtered, flickered, and then steadied.

He scrolled in silence.

Then stopped.

“I saw the headline,” he said.

He looked at Loretta, eyes distant, voice dry and cold.

“The Towers. 1998. Not 2001. It’s a real article. In my files.”

He looked back at the screen.

“And now you’re telling me the blackout was 2000. Not 2003, like I remember. And the ’93 bombing? *It’s gone*. Like it never happened.”

He backed away, almost dazed.

“I thought I was chasing the past. But it’s chasing me. Rearranging itself. Hiding what doesn’t fit.”

He looked to Loretta as if she might confirm it. Instead, she just watched him with a quiet, tightening concern.

Leonard's breath hitched.

"The record is wrong," he whispered. "*Everything is wrong.*"

Loretta pulled her hand back. Her voice cooled. "Leonard, what are you talking about?"

"No," he snapped, rising. "*You're the one not remembering!*"

"Maybe you're just a little confused," she said.

"*And maybe you're part of it, Louis!*" he hissed. "*You and her. You're the same, aren't you? You both wore the face of truth! But when I looked underneath—there was nothing there!*"

Loretta rose slowly, jaw clenched. Her voice was steady but dark now.

"Leonard."

"I kissed a lie," he spat. "Thirty years ago. One time, that's it! And then, something changed. The world's been lying to me ever since!"

Loretta took a step back. "You kissed a person."

"*She wasn't real!*"

"You mean she wasn't what you expected," Loretta shot back. "That doesn't make her fiction." Loretta took a beat and then said, "Did you have sex with her?"

"*No! How dare you ask that?!*"

"It sounds to me like something more happened!" Loretta spat.

Leonard staggered back toward the microfilm machine, panic flaring. The reel jammed. The screen flickered. He banged his fist against the casing, hard.

"You're all frauds!" he shouted. *"Every last one of you!"*

Loretta stepped closer, eyes hard. "You don't get to erase people just because you're afraid of what they show you."

He turned on her, wild.

"What the hell do you know? *You're just a man in a wig!*"

"And you're a man drowning in your own lies."

The microfilm reader went black.

And Leonard was left staring at his own reflection in the blank screen—fragile, shaking, half-erased.

The screen, thought dead, gave a mechanical groan—a soft flicker—then static. Leonard flinched. Loretta stood still, her eyes locked on him.

Then, slowly, a headline scrolled into view:

"MURDER IN HELL'S KITCHEN: MERCURY LOUNGE ENTERTAINER FOUND SLAIN"

Date: *March 1993.*

Below the headline was a photo—grainy, black and white—of a police cordon outside the Mercury Lounge. A name he vaguely remembered surfaced in the byline. Details blurred at the edges: suspect at large. The article ended mid-sentence as if it had been yanked from the page.

Leonard staggered backward.

"No..." he said, barely audible. "No, that's not—*this can't be!*"

His hands trembled as he reached for the microfilm knob. He scrolled back and forth. The story remained. Glued to the screen like a wound that wouldn't close.

Loretta stepped cautiously around the table. "*Leonard?*"

He turned on her with a suddenness that made her stop mid-step.

"You brought this," he said. "You being here—*this*—it rewrote the file."

She blinked. "What are you *talking* about?"

He jabbed a finger at the screen. "This never happened. None of this happened! Not until you showed up. *I didn't kill her!*"

Loretta frowned. "Leonard—"

"Don't say my name like that."

Her voice was firmer. "You think I control your machine? You think my being here conjures headlines?"

He pointed at her, desperate, unraveling. "You're not just here. You're *part of this*."

In one jagged motion, Leonard stepped forward and ripped the wig from Loretta's head, sending strands of styled auburn cascading to the floor.

"Louis," he spat.

She recoiled.

"You're not a woman. *You're just another lie!* And now I have you here, trapped."

Loretta stumbled backward as Leonard lunged. He was faster than he had any right to be—gripped not by strength but by something ancient and unspent, the kind of rage that outlives reason.

She grabbed for anything—a stack of files, a wobbling shelf—toppling a paper tower that collapsed like a broken ledger between them.

Leonard tripped, crashing into the debris of his life's work. He grunted, knees splintering, as he crawled through the wreckage like a man clawing out of his own grave.

Loretta stood over him now, breathing hard. She turned to the microfilm machine and read the article on the screen, "Leonard, you're going to confess to what you did."

Leonard raised his head, blood in his eyes, his mouth trembling somewhere between laughter and a snarl.

"Confess to what?"

She stepped forward, towering over him.

"The police never even questioned you. Why would they? No one cared about men like her. Not in Hell's Kitchen! When the *Chronicle* folded, you thought it would be the end of it. You never knew her name," Loretta whispered, "but you remember her smile. The way she touched your hand."

Leonard shook his head. His hands searched the floor for something—balance, maybe. Or denial.

"She waited for you outside that night. The bar was closing. You don't remember following her. You don't remember what you said. But you remember... the sound her body made when it hit the alley floor."

Leonard shook his head slowly. *"It's not true; it's all a lie! I left her!"*

"You left her, alright; you left her dead."

Her voice cracked, but she didn't stop.

"You spent decades trying to file it away—like a misprint in the margins. Thought if you buried her deep enough, history would forget her, too."

Leonard whimpered, crawling closer.

“But she didn’t stay buried.”

Loretta’s breath was sharp now.

“She keeps resurfacing. In headlines that don’t exist. In files that rearrange themselves. In voices, you can’t silence. And now—”

He looked up at her, hollow-eyed.

“You see her in *me*,” she said.

Loretta nodded. Her eyes were no longer filled with pity—but something colder, resolute.

And then—

The lights returned. The city-wide blackout was over.

The lights in Leonard’s cramped apartment blinked on all at once—kitchen, hallway, overhead—a sudden flood of electric daylight that stunned the room out of shadow.

Leonard gasped and looked up, caught in the shock of light. His pupils narrowed like an animal before the blade. His mouth opened. His hand clutched his chest.

“Too late,” he rasped. “It’s too late for the truth. Far too late.”

And then, with a final exhale, he collapsed sideways, like a building folding into dust, his breath cut short and silent.

A long moment passed.

The microfilm reader blinked once—just once—a brief blue flicker, and then it faded to black.

The room was still again.

Only Loretta remained standing, her torn blouse trembling at her ribs, strands of hair clinging to her damp brow. She looked down at

Leonard's body—not as a victor, not as a witness, but as the last living page in a long-forgotten archive.

And at that moment, with the machines silenced and the light returned, the record was finally complete. Had Leonard Greaves killed someone or only been responsible for their death?

In the days that followed, the newspapers would carry an account of Leonard Greaves' passing. They reported he had stumbled in the dark during the brief city-wide blackout and died of a heart attack. He was found by a neighbor who came to check on him. Leonard Greaves, a resident of Hell's Kitchen for 55 years, worked at the *New York Chronicle*, which had folded some years earlier. He had no survivors. He was 72 years old. Or 75. There was conflicting information on his exact date of birth. No other details of his death were provided.

CITY OF MONUMENTS

STONE AND SKYLINE

“Cut off as I am, it is inevitable that I should sometimes feel like a shadow walking in a shadowy world. When this happens I ask to be taken to New York City. Always I return home weary but I have the comforting certainty that mankind is real flesh and I myself am not a dream.”

— **Helen Keller, *Midstream: My Later Life***

SKYLINE

Elliot Van Alen leaned against the window of his Park Avenue apartment, his forehead pressed to the cold glass. Fifty-four stories below, the city churned relentlessly, its lights flickering like neurons firing in Manhattan's collective brain.

But tonight, the view offered Elliot no solace. His thoughts were fixated on the building he'd spent the last year designing, a sleek, modern tower meant to crown the Midtown skyline. It had been rejected that morning, dismissed with a single, devastating word.

"Derivative," the client had said, his voice thin with the brittle authority of disappointment. "We wanted something timeless, and this... well, it just isn't it."

Elliot hadn't argued. He'd learned there was no point. Once the industry branded you a has-been, you became invisible—your ideas, no matter how bold or beautiful, drowned out by the hum of younger voices. At forty-three, he was in freefall; his last two projects were scrapped, and his name was whispered with pity at gala dinners.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

He closed his eyes and tried to summon a sense of direction, but his thoughts spiraled instead, circling the same nagging truth: maybe they were right. Maybe his best ideas *were* behind him.

That was when he found Solomon, an elderly black man hunched by the subway grate on the corner of 43rd and Lexington. He was wrapped in a battered coat; his blind eyes and head tilted slightly upward as though he were listening to the city.

Elliot had no history of gestures like dropping bills in guitar cases or pausing at the sight of cardboard signs, but something about Solomon captivated him.

“You need help?” Elliot asked, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat.

Solomon turned his head slightly. “Don’t we all?”

Elliot laughed, a sharp, tired sound. “Fair enough. I’m serious, though. What do you need?”

“Coffee would be nice.” Solomon’s voice was gravelly, but there was a lilt to it, almost like a song.

They ended up at the diner around the corner, seated across from each other in a booth. Elliot ordered pancakes and eggs for the man, who introduced himself as Solomon. The name suited him, Elliot thought, regal and ancient.

“You live around here?” Solomon asked, running his fingers lightly over the rim of his coffee cup.

“Park Avenue,” Elliot said, then immediately regretted it. Solomon gave a low chuckle.

“Must be nice,” he said.

“It’s alright,” Elliot replied. He felt ridiculous, sitting in his tailored

coat, trying to converse with someone whose life he couldn't begin to imagine.

But then Solomon said something that stopped him.

"This city," he murmured, "it's always talking if you know how to listen. The hum of it, the way the sounds stack on each other, like a rhythm. It's all structure, you know? A kind of architecture."

Elliot stared at him. "Architecture," he repeated.

"Sure. Everything has a shape. Even sound." Solomon tapped his fingers against the table's edge, a staccato beat. "I might be blind but I can see. If you know what I mean," Solomon chuckled.

Elliot shifted on his seat, and Solomon sat quietly for the moment, his blind eyes still and unblinking, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Elliot Van Alen," Solomon said as though tasting the name. "That's you, right?"

Elliot's brow furrowed. "That's right," he said cautiously. "How did you know?"

"You told me," Solomon replied.

Elliot blinked, searching his memory. "I don't recall telling you."

"Maybe you didn't," Solomon said, shrugging. "Maybe you did. Doesn't matter." He leaned back slightly, tilting his head. "Reason I ask is... you're not related to the Van Alen who designed the Chrysler Building, are you?"

The air between them seemed to thicken, the question landing with a weight Elliot hadn't expected. He leaned forward slightly, his voice low. "As a matter of fact, I am. William Van Alen was my granduncle. How did you know that?"

Solomon chuckled softly, his fingers idly tracing the edge of his coffee cup. "Everyone knows about William Van Alen. He's a piece of the skyline. People like me, we don't forget that kind of thing."

"People like you?"

"People who pay attention," Solomon said simply. "It's all still up there, you know. The Empire State, the Chrysler, the bridges. They don't just belong to the city; they belong to time itself. You ever think about that? The weight of it, carrying a name like Van Alen?"

Elliot's mouth went dry. The question struck somewhere deeper than he cared to admit. He nodded stiffly. "I've thought about it."

"Of course you have," Solomon said, his smile widening just enough to unsettle. "It's in your blood, after all. You can't escape it, no matter how much you try."

Elliot stared at him, the man's words curling like smoke in his mind. "You seem to know a lot about me for someone I just met," he said finally, his tone sharper than he intended.

"Do I?" Solomon said. "Or maybe you're just surprised by how much of yourself you've given away without noticing." He paused, letting the thought linger. "That's the thing about names like Van Alen. They carry a lot of weight, but they're not exactly subtle. It's like walking around with a neon sign over your head."

Elliot couldn't decide whether to laugh or get up and leave. But something about Solomon, something in his deliberate calm, held him in place. "You're an unusual guy," Elliot said, leaning back in his chair.

"Maybe," Solomon replied. He gestured toward the window, where the city lights blurred into streaks against the glass. "But this city? It's full of unusual people. You don't survive here otherwise."

Elliot studied the man, the lines etched into his face, the odd serenity in his voice. He still couldn't explain why he'd stopped to talk to him, why he was still sitting here, and yet...

"You want to come up? Hang out, talk a bit?" Elliot heard himself say.

Solomon cocked his head slightly, as though considering. "Park Avenue? Damn!"

Elliot nodded, his voice quieter now. "Why not?"

Solomon didn't move for a moment, and Elliot thought he'd refuse. But then Solomon stood, sliding his chair back with a faint scrape.

"Alright," Solomon said. "Lead the way."

Elliot dropped a twenty on the table and rose to his feet, his pulse quickening as they stepped out into the cool night air. He told himself it was nothing, just a strange, impulsive decision to indulge a blind man's curiosity. But deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was stepping into something much larger than himself—a vortex he couldn't see, but that was already pulling him in.

Solomon moved cautiously about Elliot's apartment, his fingers grazing surfaces as though reading them like Braille. He stopped at a framed piece hanging low on the wall and tilted his head.

"What's this one?" he asked.

Elliot glanced over. "That's Basquiat," he said. "From his 'SAMO' days."

"Basquiat," Solomon repeated the name slowly, tasting it. "I like it. Young Brooklyn boy, right? Didn't make it to thirty."

Elliot nodded reflexively, then remembered and said, "Yeah. He was part of the whole '80s downtown scene. You know, Warhol, Keith

Haring... it was chaos, but brilliant chaos. The city felt alive then. Like anything was possible."

"You must have been a kid back then. How old are you?"

"I was born in '84."

Solomon smiled faintly. "That's when I came to live in Manhattan. 1984. Back when this city still had dirt under its nails. You could smell the struggle, and the ambition."

Elliot looked at him, intrigued. "What did you come here for?"

Solomon traced the edge of a shelf with his hand. "Music," he said simply. "Classical, mostly. I was a pianist, back then."

"You were?"

"Not a great one," Solomon admitted. "But good enough to get by. I'd play gigs in little cafes and hotel lobbies, pick up session work here and there. At night, I'd go out, wander the clubs, meet people. Women." He laughed, a low, rich sound. "There were always women."

"Sounds like quite a life," Elliot said.

"It was," Solomon said, and his voice softened. He moved to the window, standing close to the glass, though his unseeing eyes stared past the city lights. "Then I lost it."

Elliot hesitated. "How?"

Solomon leaned his forehead against the glass as though he could feel the city's pulse through it. "Detachment of the retina," he said. "It started in one eye, then the other. By the time I saw a doctor, it was too late to save either. I was twenty-nine."

Elliot felt its weight settle between them. "I'm sorry," he said finally.

Solomon shrugged. "Life doesn't care if you're sorry." He paused, then turned, his cloudy eyes fixing Elliot. "You ever think about what it means to lose something you love? Not just to misplace it, but to have it ripped away? Something that's part of you?"

Elliot thought of the skyscraper that had been rejected that morning, of the hollow ache it left in his chest. But he knew better than to compare. "I'm not sure," he admitted.

"I think about it all the time," Solomon said. "Losing my sight meant losing the piano, losing music. I'd spent my whole life believing music was my purpose. And then, just like that..." He snapped his fingers. "Gone. I didn't know who I was anymore. I could have learned to play blind, I suppose. But I didn't want that. That's the thing about losing something—it forces you to look for something else. Or someone else."

Solomon turned toward the floor-to-ceiling window, his movements deliberate, as though he were conserving energy for something that mattered. "Mind if I check out the view from up here?" he asked. "A man of my means doesn't get to the 54th floor very often."

"Of course," Elliot said, stepping closer to him. "I'll help you. We're looking at the best view in the city. Midtown is right at our feet, and Downtown is further on. You can see all the way —"

"Lady Liberty in the harbor?" Solomon interrupted.

"Yes," Elliot replied, smiling.

"Hold on," Solomon tilted his head slightly as though listening to the skyline itself. "Let me help *you*. The Empire State Building should be... right about there. And over to the west...the Hudson Yards. You've got those new glass-and-steel giants like someone dropped ice cubes into the skyline."

Elliot stepped closer, watching him intently.

“Your granduncle’s Chrysler Building’s further over, east side, of course. You can’t miss the spire. Stroke of genius, if you ask me. You’ve got Grand Central tucked down there, don’t you? Those train tracks running like veins under the skin of the city.”

Elliot stared at him, amazed. “How... how are you doing this? You can’t see any of it.”

“But I’ve got the map right here,” Solomon said, tapping the side of his head with two fingers. “When you’ve lived in this city long enough, it gets inside you. You know the rhythm of the streets, the way things fit together. I might not see the skyline, but I’ve walked through it a thousand times. The Empire State on 34th, Chrysler a little higher up. You go west, you hit the Hudson; east, the river and the bridges. It’s all there.”

Elliot shook his head, impressed. “Still. That’s uncanny. You’ve got the layout memorized.”

“Not memorized,” Solomon corrected. “It’s... felt. You don’t need eyes to know this city. You just have to listen to it, feel its pulse. The way the wind shifts—it’s not random, you know. It’s channeled between the buildings. The city talks to you if you let it.”

Elliot turned back to the window, looking out at the glittering expanse of Manhattan. For all the hours he’d spent staring at this view, he realized he’d never seen it the way Solomon described it: not just as a collection of towers and lights, but as something alive, breathing, stitched together by invisible threads.

“You architects build the skeletons, but the city fills them in—people, sound, stories. It’s never really yours, you know.”

Elliot looked at Solomon again, trying to imagine what it was like to navigate the world without sight, relying only on memory, intuition, and sound. He felt a pang of something he couldn’t name—admiration, maybe, or envy.

“You really don’t miss a thing, do you?” Elliot said.

“Tell me now. That building your client told you was trash. Describe it to me. I’ll help you redesign it.”

Elliot leaned against the dining table, staring at the blind man who had somehow slipped into his life and now sat before him, speaking with the quiet confidence of someone who knew things Elliot couldn’t begin to grasp. The absurdity of it struck him like a jolt—what kind of architect takes advice from a stranger who can’t even see? And yet, there was something about Solomon, about the deliberate way he spoke, his words like measured steps on uneven ground.

Elliot opened his mouth to protest, to brush off the offer as ridiculous, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, he felt an odd pull, the same sensation that had made him stop on the street earlier that day, the same strange gravity that had brought Solomon into his apartment. Who was this man, really? A drifter? A relic of some forgotten version of New York? Or something else entirely?

“I don’t even know why I told you all that,” Elliot said finally, his voice low.



Solomon came and went, night after night. He never revealed too much about himself—where he came from, where he slept. He seemed to belong everywhere and nowhere at once, slipping effortlessly between the city’s forgotten spaces and its most rarefied heights. He spoke of penthouses and street corners with the same familiarity, as if he had lived a hundred different lives and left no trace in any of them. It should have unnerved Elliot, and maybe it did at first. But the more time he spent with Solomon, the more that unease settled into something else—not comfort exactly, but acceptance.

Elliot stopped questioning how Solomon fit into the world. Instead, they discussed other topics. Art. Music. The city, always the city.

It had started on that first night with the Basquiat that hung in Elliot's apartment. After that, conversations about architecture gave way to discussions about color and form, the fury of Pollock's splatters, and the aching precision of Hopper's loneliness. Solomon spoke about paintings as if he had seen them in another life.

"You think blindness cuts you off from beauty," Solomon had said once, tracing the rim of his coffee cup. "But it doesn't. It forces you to remember it more clearly."

Music was the same. Solomon had played piano once—Elliot still wasn't sure if he believed him—but his knowledge of classical music was encyclopedic. He could hum the second movement of a Mahler symphony from memory, explaining why Chopin's *Nocturnes* always sounded like regret. They would sit in Elliot's apartment, whiskey between them, as Bach or Coltrane drifted through the speakers, dissolving the gap between their lives.

"You hear this?" Solomon once asked as Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* filled the room.

"Of course," Elliot said.

"No," Solomon had said. "You listen to it. But do you *hear* it?"

Elliot frowned. "What's the difference?"

Solomon smiled, that cryptic, knowing smile. "One is passive. The other requires surrender."

It was like that with everything. Solomon didn't just see the world differently—he *felt* it differently. To him, a city wasn't just buildings and streets but rhythm and breath. A painting wasn't just pigment but emotion trapped in color. Music wasn't just notes but time itself, bending.

And in ways he couldn't explain, Elliot was starting to understand.

Solomon had become a fixture in Elliot's life without either of them acknowledging it. A presence that arrived without warning disappeared without explanation, but somehow always returned.

Neither of them mentioned the word 'friendship.'

As Solomon stood by the window of Elliot's apartment, high above the city, his blind eyes turned toward the skyline, and as if he could see it, he asked Elliot to join him.

"Are you hearing it?" Solomon asked.

"Hearing what?"

Solomon smiled, his reflection wavering in the darkened glass. "You know. The city, man."

Elliot inhaled. The hum had always been there, but he had never truly noticed it until now. It pulsed beneath the noise of car horns and distant sirens, beneath the wind threading its way through the steel canyons of Manhattan—a vibration, deep and endless.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The city stretched out before them, sprawling, infinite.

As the weeks passed, their conversations deepened, turning into something more. Solomon spoke of architecture the way poets spoke of love — with reverence and hunger.

"Why do we build up? The pyramids, the cathedrals, the skyscrapers — why is height always the goal?" Solomon asked, slouching comfortably in a chair. "You think it's about reaching heaven, don't you?" he said finally. "Some grand spiritual instinct, some old primal urge to get closer to God."

Elliot smirked. "Isn't it?"

Solomon chuckled. “No, man. It’s about the ego. Every empire builds higher than the last. Height is proof of dominance. Proof that *we were here*.” He gestured to the skyline beyond the window. “You see a city. I see an obituary. All of this was built by men who are long dead.”

Elliot frowned. “That’s a bleak way to look at it.”

“Is it?” Solomon’s voice was smooth, unhurried. “You think a straight line is order? Does a steel frame make sense of the world?” He gestured toward the window, his blind eyes fixed on a point beyond it. “People don’t move in straight lines. They twist, they turn, they get lost. The buildings that last—the ones that *breathe*—know this.”

Elliot shook his head. “Architecture is about reason. It’s about control.”

Solomon laughed, a low, knowing sound. “You think you’re in control?” He gestured in the direction of Elliot’s blueprints strewn across the table. “That’s cute.”

Elliot bristled. “Maybe I haven’t explained what I designed carefully enough.”

“No, you have. I think you followed something,” Solomon said. “The way a jazz musician follows a riff. The way a poet follows a rhythm. You’re hearing it now, aren’t you? The shape it wants to take.”

Elliot didn’t answer. Because, for the first time, he wasn’t entirely sure the building had come from him at all.

Elliot had grown up under the long shadow of his name. *Van Alen*. It carried weight, history, and expectation. It was inked into the bones of New York itself, carved into the ribs of the Chrysler Building, the gleaming spire that stood defiant among the city’s giants. His granduncle, William Van Alen, had dreamed it into being—a cathedral of modernity, an Art Deco exclamation point piercing the sky.

And then, nothing.

William had never built again.

A lawsuit was filed against Walter Chrysler, a dispute over fees. The greatest triumph of Van Alen's career had been followed by silence, by decades of invisibility. It was the kind of story that should have been a cautionary tale, a reminder that even the most audacious visionaries could be discarded by the city they sought to define.

But for Elliot, it had always been a haunting.

He had spent years telling himself that he was different. That his work would not be reduced to a single masterpiece. That he would not be forgotten.

"It has to be different," he told Solomon one evening. "Not just taller. Not just shinier."

Solomon tapped his fingers idly against the hardwood of his chair's armrest. "Then what does it need to be?"

Elliot exhaled, rubbing his forehead. "It has to move."

Solomon smiled. "Ah. You're starting to understand."

"I don't mean literally," Elliot said quickly, though part of him wasn't sure. "I mean... buildings today, they're all rigid, predictable. Boxes stacked on boxes. This one—it should feel alive. Like it's part of the city's breath, not just a monument to someone's ego."

Solomon tilted his head, as if listening to something just out of reach. "And what will they say about you when it's done?"

Elliot hesitated. "That I didn't just build another tower." He looked down at his hands. "That I changed the skyline."

"The skyline," Solomon murmured. "A second horizon. A man-made constellation." He leaned back, his blind eyes unfocused. "You ever think about how buildings outlast their creators? How a man can

spend his whole life shaping the world around him, but in the end, the world moves on without him.”

“Every architect thinks about that,” Elliot admitted.

Solomon nodded. “Then the real question is: does it matter?”

Just before leaving Elliot’s apartment for the night, Solomon stopped by the door and put a firm hand on Elliot’s shoulder. His touch was light but unmistakably steady, the kind of grip that didn’t ask for permission.

“I’d like you to take a walk with me.”

“A walk?”

“From point A to point B,” Solomon said. “We’ll start at sunrise and finish by sunset.”

Elliot frowned. “Where?”

“From the bottom of Manhattan to the top. Battery Park to Inwood.”

Elliot let out a short laugh, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah, that’s not happening. I’ve got meetings tomorrow.”

“Cancel them,” Solomon said, his voice light, but not joking.

Elliot shook his head. “I don’t have time for some—some pilgrimage. If you have ideas for the building, tell me.”

Solomon tilted his head, as if listening to something just out of reach. “Ideas,” he repeated, amused. “That’s what you think this is about?”

Elliot’s irritation flared. “That’s what you said it was about.”

Solomon faced him fully now. “How do you plan to design something for this city when you don’t even know what it *is*?”

Elliot’s frown deepened. “I know the city.”

Solomon smirked. “No. You *see* the city. Through windows, from penthouse parties, from the back of a cab. That’s not knowing. That’s *glancing*.”

Elliot said nothing, because it was mostly true.

“You want to build something that belongs to the skyline?” Solomon continued. “Then you need to understand what it stands on—the streets, the people, the rhythm of it all. You need to feel it under your feet. Like I do.” He tapped his cane lightly against the hardwood.

Elliot exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “And you think walking the whole damn island will give me that?”

Solomon took a step closer. “I think the reason you’re resisting so hard is because you’re afraid you’ve never actually known the place you claim to love.”

That stung.

Elliot stared at him, feeling his pulse quicken in that uncomfortable way Solomon had a habit of provoking. The man was always a step ahead, always peeling away the layers Elliot didn’t realize he had wrapped around himself.

“Battery Park to Inwood,” Solomon said. “We stop along the way. You listen, you learn, and maybe—just maybe—you start to hear what the city is trying to tell you.” He let a small, knowing smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “By the way, those Italian shoes you got on aren’t gonna make it. And don’t ask me how I know they’re Italian. A player like you don’t wear less.”

Elliot looked down at his polished dress shoes, then back at the skyline beyond the window.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Let’s walk.”

Solomon nodded as if he had expected no other answer, then turned to leave.

Elliot surprised himself by stopping him. “Wait.”

Solomon paused, tilting his head slightly.

“Stay,” Elliot said. He didn’t know why he said it, but once the word was out, it felt right.

Solomon was silent for a moment. Then, with an almost imperceptible nod, he set his cane against the wall. “Alright. But you don’t have to do this.”

Elliot gestured toward the second bedroom down the hall. “I know. But I got a guest room and I never have a guest.”

Solomon smiled, that same unreadable expression. “Luxury accommodations? You know, I can get used to that, Elliot.”

Elliot poured himself another whiskey and muttered, “You may know the layout of the city, but not this apartment. Let me show you the way.”

As Elliot guided him, Solomon let his fingers drift along the hallway wall, lightly skimming the paint, the wood—mapping the space through touch alone.

“Good bones,” Solomon murmured. “Oh, I’m an early riser.”

“So am I. 5 AM. Good night.”

Elliot, sipping his drink, watched Solomon disappear into the room.

Tomorrow, they would walk the city together.

And Elliot wasn’t sure who would be leading whom.



The streets were still damp from the night before, glistening in the early morning light. Down in the oldest part of Manhattan, the air

carried the weight of history—stone, and steel pressed tight, the ghosts of a thousand deals made and broken.

Elliot rolled his shoulders, adjusting to the feel of the running shoes he'd thrown on that morning.

Solomon, walking beside him, grinned. "A proper city man turned athlete."

Elliot sighed. "You said my dress shoes wouldn't make it."

"I said your Italian shoes wouldn't make it."

Elliot shook his head. "I didn't take you for a guy with strong opinions on footwear."

Solomon tapped his cane against the pavement. "I have opinions on everything."

They turned a corner, the sound of gulls overhead mingling with the early morning hum of downtown. Solomon lifted his chin slightly as if catching a familiar scent in the sea air that rolled across Battery Park.

"There's a guy, Charlie, runs a little espresso stand at the edge of Battery Park," he said. "Knows a good coffee bean."

Elliot raised an eyebrow. "You have a preferred barista?"

"I have standards." Solomon smirked. "Besides, first stop of the day ought to be coffee. You're going to need it."

Elliot scoffed but followed.

Just as Solomon had said, there was Charlie—an older man with sleeves rolled up, a weathered face, and a sharp eye for those who actually knew their coffee from the tourists who drowned it in sugar. When he saw Solomon, he didn't hesitate.

"Solomon, my man!"

“That must be Charlie. Charlie, this is my friend Elliot. Elliot, Charlie. I’m taking Elliot on the blind man’s tour of Manhattan today.”

“You don’t say! Well, what can I get for you gentlemen this morning?”

“You already know what I want, Charlie.”

Charlie laughed, then turned to Elliot. “And for you?”

Elliot hesitated. “Uh—black, I guess.”

Charlie gave him a look, unimpressed. “Guess?”

“Black,” Elliot repeated, firmer.

Charlie poured the coffee and handed it over. Solomon took his own cup, inhaled deeply, and let out a satisfied sigh. “Now that’s a cup of coffee.”

They walked on, the city beginning to wake around them. Elliot took a sip of his coffee, then glanced at Solomon.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked.

Solomon smirked. “That mattress in your guest room? Firm enough to break a man.”

Elliot laughed.

“Not that I’m complaining,” Solomon added. “Roof over my head, warm bed, and the kind of company that comes with expensive whiskey. I’ve had worse nights.”

Elliot didn’t ask where those worse nights had been.

Instead, he watched the city move—workers in suits moving with purpose, delivery trucks rumbling by, tourists already angling for the first ferry to the Statue of Liberty. Solomon walked at a steady pace, cane tapping in rhythm, moving through the streets as though he knew them better than Elliot ever could.

Elliot had to remind himself—*Solomon was blind*. And yet, he spoke as though he had seen it all. It was a peculiar thing that hung over their walk, an uncanny contradiction that Elliot couldn't shake.

By the time they reached the Woolworth Building, the morning traffic had thickened.

Solomon stopped, turning toward the towering neo-Gothic structure. "You know this one, don't you?"

"Woolworth," Elliot said. "Finished in 1913. The tallest in the world for a while."

"The Cathedral of Commerce," Solomon murmured. "Cass Gilbert built it like a church because that's what skyscrapers were back then—monuments to ambition." He gestured toward it. "Look at those details. Gargoyles, vaulted arches, buttresses. A medieval castle built for businessmen."

Elliot studied the façade, its intricate carvings, and the way it felt *crafted* rather than just built. "They don't make them like this anymore."

"No," Solomon said. "Because we stopped believing buildings should have souls."

By the time they reached Bryant Park, Elliot had had enough. He exhaled sharply and slowed his pace, rolling his shoulders. "I need a break."

Solomon snorted. "A break? We're barely getting started."

"Barely getting started?" Elliot shook his head and found an empty bench.

"We'll never make it to Harlem by dinner." Solomon smiled as he sat beside him. "Am I walking too fast for you?"

Elliot let out a dry laugh. "If anyone should be complaining, it's you."

Solomon stretched his legs out in front of him. “Why? Because I got age on you? Son, I ain’t old. Old is when you’re dead.”

Elliot smirked. “I didn’t mean to say you’re old. It’s just ...”

Solomon tilted his head, listening to the city around him. “You know, my people were from the Caribbean. St. Kitts, specifically. They were travellers long before I got here.”

Elliot was caught off guard. Solomon had never volunteered anything about himself before, not like this.

“They came to New York looking for something better. Something stable. A place to plant roots.” He smiled faintly. “It made me... genteel, I suppose. That’s what my mother used to call it. We had old manners in a new world.”

“Genteel?” Elliot said, half amused, half intrigued. “You don’t strike me as the polite society type.”

Solomon chuckled. “That’s because you think manners are about posture and silverware. It’s not that. It’s a way of holding yourself. A way of seeing the world—feeling it, even when it refuses to see you back.” He gestured toward the park. “This place? This is genteel. Not because of who’s sitting here, but because of what it offers. Space. Room to breathe. A kindness in a city that forgets kindness.”

Elliot followed Solomon’s gesture, watching as people sprawled on the grass, as others sat quietly on benches, reading, sipping coffee. The city moved around them, but here, it softened.

“You know,” Elliot said, “New York keeps trying to bring more green into its architecture. Vertical gardens, rooftop parks, terraces. It’s a way to counterbalance the steel and glass.”

Solomon nodded. “It’s a start. But what’s at the base?”

Elliot frowned. “What do you mean?”

Solomon tapped his cane lightly against the ground. “A building grows like a tree. It needs roots, somewhere to pull breath from. If the bottom is nothing but concrete, you’re just stacking weight on dead space. No wonder so many buildings feel suffocating.”

Elliot considered this. “So, my tower—”

“Needs a park at its feet,” Solomon said simply.

Elliot looked back at Bryant Park. The way the buildings framed it, like they were guarding something delicate but vital. The park felt like a held breath, a moment of silence in the relentless noise of the city.

That’s when his eye caught something in the distance.

It shimmered in the midday sun, its spire slicing into the sky like the blade of a dagger. The details were faint from here, softened by the haze. Still, Elliot didn’t need to see them up close to know them by heart—the radiant crown, the intricate Art Deco flourishes, the unmistakable silhouette that set it apart from every other tower in Manhattan.

His pulse quickened.

“Quite a masterpiece,” Solomon murmured.

Elliot turned sharply. “How the hell do you know what I’m looking at?”

Solomon smirked. “What else would you be looking at, Mr. Van Alen?”

Elliot exhaled, shaking his head. The man was impossible.

They left the park and began walking east, the Chrysler Building growing larger with every step.

“The race to the sky in the 1920s was brutal. Everyone wanted to build the tallest tower. My granduncle had a rival—H. Craig Sever-

ance. They both kept redesigning their buildings to be taller, one-upping each other in secret.”

Solomon grinned. “And then came the spire.”

Elliot nodded. “October 23, 1929. He had it hidden inside the building the entire time, waiting. Then, in a single day, they assembled it, piece by piece, raising it from the inside out.”

“The ultimate architectural sleight of hand,” Solomon mused.

Elliot smirked. “Yeah. A last-minute trick to make sure it would be the tallest.” His smirk faded slightly. “For a moment, anyway.”

Solomon nodded knowingly. “The Empire State was already on the horizon.”

“The very next day—October 24, 1929—the stock market crashed. By the time the Chrysler Building was completed, the world had changed.”

They stopped at the base of the Chrysler Building, the sun glinting off its steel arches. Elliot looked up, his jaw tightening. “This was supposed to be his legacy. And yet, outside of architecture circles, almost no one even knows his name.”

Solomon was silent for a long moment. Then, he turned his head slightly. “And what about you?”

Elliot frowned. “What about me?”

Solomon’s voice was quiet but steady. “You trying to finish what he started?”

Elliot didn’t answer right away. He looked up again, past the intricate eagles jutting out from the building’s corners, past the spire that had once made it the tallest in the world.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

Solomon smirked. “Then maybe it’s time you figured that out.”

They stood there a moment longer, the past towering over them, before walking on.

In the days following the walk with Solomon, Elliot moved through his Park Avenue apartment like a man caught in a riptide—adrift yet restless, tugged by currents he couldn’t name. The walk had left a residue, a hum that wouldn’t quiet. He’d gone to bed that night with his notebook open on the dining table, pages scrawled with jagged lines and half-formed shapes. By morning, the euphoria had curdled into something heavier, a mood that flickered between exhilaration and unease.

Solomon’s words had planted a seed—creativity wasn’t about the sleek monuments Elliot chased. It was about connection, about hearing the city’s pulse and letting it guide his hand. That realization thrilled Elliot, yes, but it also terrified him.

The tower he’d been designing, the one dismissed as ‘derivative,’ had begun to morph in his sketches. Where it once stood rigid, a glassy spike meant to impress, it now softened—its base flared like roots sinking into the earth. Solomon had done that, with his talk of sound as structure, of buildings that didn’t just rise but lived.

Elliot saw it taking shape, a design that could redeem him, could silence the whispers of ‘has-been.’ But with that vision came a challenge he hadn’t anticipated: to pull this off, he’d have to lean into something raw, something he’d buried beneath years of polished detachment.

This tower wasn’t his alone; it was theirs, a collaboration born from a blind man’s wisdom and a walk he hadn’t planned. That dependency gnawed at him.

What if Solomon's insight faltered?

What if the design—their design—failed again?

Worse, what if it succeeded, and he had to admit he'd needed someone to pull him from the wreckage of his own stagnation?

The thought clawed at his pride, that old Van Alen entitlement he'd inherited like a birthright, the same pride that had once propelled him to the top and now threatened to drag him under.

Elliot's instinct, honed by years of isolation, was to pull back. Distance was his refuge, a habit as familiar as the tailored overcoat he shrugged on each morning.

He'd distanced himself from Lena, his ex-wife, when her quiet pleas for connection became too loud; from Claire, his sister, when her life's milestones clashed with his deadlines; from the city itself, retreating to this high perch where the streets were just a pretty abstraction.

He sat at his drafting table, the apartment silent save for the faint hum of traffic far below, and tried to work. The lines wouldn't come. His hand hovered over the paper, trembling slightly as if waiting for permission. He'd stare at the Chrysler Building through the window, its spire a silver rebuke, and feel the weight of William Van Alen's legacy press down harder.

As a kid, he'd worshipped that tower, sketching it in crayon, dreaming of his own mark on the skyline. Now it mocked him, a benchmark he'd never touch—not because he couldn't, but because he'd forgotten how to try.

Solomon had reminded him that his gift wasn't in the name or the solitude; it was in the tether to others, to the city, to the stories humming beneath the steel. But accepting that meant dismantling the walls he'd built, and Elliot wasn't sure he knew how.

By the third day, Elliot's mood had darkened, a stew of frustration and longing. The pressure wasn't just about the tower now—it was about who he'd become if he failed, or if he succeeded.

Irrelevance loomed, a specter he'd dodged for years.

By the fourth day, he stood at the window, forehead pressed to the glass, the cold seeping into his skin. The city glittered below, indifferent as ever, and he felt the pull of Solomon's absence like a missing limb. He'd distanced himself, yes, but it hadn't worked. The sketches stayed unfinished; the tower stalled in his mind.

The buzzer jolted him upright, a harsh buzz cutting through the apartment's hush. Elliot hesitated, then crossed to the intercom. "Yeah?"

"It's me," came Solomon's gravelly lilt, unmistakable even through the static. "Let me up, Van Alen. I've got something."

Minutes later, Solomon swept through the door, cane tapping a staccato beat, his battered coat shedding the faint scent of asphalt and coffee. His cloudy eyes gleamed with fire, and before Elliot could speak, Solomon launched in, words tumbling like stones down a slope.

"You ever stand at the Flatiron, down where Fifth and Twenty-Third collide?" Solomon said, pacing the hardwood as if he could still feel the pavement underfoot.

"I was there today, just leaning into it, letting it talk. That old girl—she's a wedge, you know, slicing the city like a blade, but she don't fight it. The wind comes howling down Broadway, and she splits it clean, sends it swirling around her edges. You hear it—the gusts, the echoes off the limestone, like she's breathing with the streets. I stood there an hour, maybe two, feeling how she moves with the chaos, not against it. That's what your tower's missing, man. It's gotta breathe like that—channel the city's howl, not just sit there pretty and deaf."

Elliot blinked, caught off guard by the rush of it.

Solomon dropped into a chair, still buzzing, his hands gesturing as if molding the air. “I walked the whole damn triangle today, from the prow to the back, listening to how the sound bends. It’s not just a building—it’s a rhythm, a pulse caught in stone. You put that in your design, that give-and-take, and you’ve got something alive. Not another glass coffin like those new monstrosities—One Penn, all shine and no soul. I passed that too, felt its dead hum, and thought, *‘Elliot don’t need another mistake like that.’* No, this tower—it’s gotta *sing*, man. You hear me?”

Elliot nodded slowly, the image sinking in—the Flatiron’s wind-carved grace, its dialogue with the streets. He could see it: his tower’s flared base not just rooting it but funneling the city’s breath upward, a structure that danced with the noise rather than drowning it out.

Solomon’s enthusiasm was infectious, a jolt to his stalled mind, and for a fleeting moment, Elliot felt the thrill of possibility. This design could rewrite his name in the skyline.

But as Solomon leaned back, grinning faintly—“Been working on it all day out there. Figured you’d want to know”—the spark dimmed under a creeping weight. That knot in Elliot’s chest tightened, not from the vision itself, but from what it meant. This wasn’t just inspiration—it was Solomon’s inspiration, another thread weaving him deeper into a tapestry Elliot had always stitched alone. The tower was theirs now, but the plaque would say *Van Alen*. The redemption would be his. And Solomon? He’d fade back into the city’s hum, a shadow with no credit, no claim.

Elliot’s fingers drummed against the armrest, his gaze drifting to the hardwood floor. He couldn’t shake it—the quiet gnaw of unease.

Finally, he spoke, voice low, halting. “I’ve been taking your ideas, Solomon. Your insight—it’s what’s driving this. And I keep wonder-

ing... what do you get out of it? My name goes on the drawings. My career gets pulled from the ditch. But you—”

Solomon’s grin faded, his head tilting slightly as if he’d caught the shift in the air. “You think that’s what this is about?”

Elliot hesitated, eyes flicking up to meet Solomon’s cloudy gaze. “I don’t know. I just—I don’t feel right about it. Like I’m leaning on you too much. Like I’m... using you.”

Solomon’s laugh was sharp, edged with something bitter. “Jesus, Van Alen. Every time I forget, you remind me.”

“Forget what?”

“That no matter how much I know, I still end up here. That some white man’s gonna feel guilty about taking what I give, because he’s afraid I’m his goddamn redemption story.”

Elliot flinched. “That’s not what I meant.”

“But it’s what you feel,” Solomon shot back. “You’re scared I’m the key to your comeback, and you can’t stand needing me. That’s your problem, man, not mine.”

The words hit like a slap—Elliot’s pride—Van Alen pride, sharp-edged and inherited—flared.

“If I was white, would you feel the same way? People gonna be talking about this—*rich boy Van Alen found himself a magic Negro.*”

“That’s not fair.”

“That’s not fair is right! And that may not be your manner because of what I understand about you, it ain’t. But that’s coming, Elliot. That’s what they’re gonna be sayin’. And if you can’t handle your pride, you ain’t gonna be able to handle that.”

Elliot stood silent.

“Fair.” Solomon snorted. “Nothing’s fair. You think it’s fair I lost my eyesight? You wanna talk about fair? This isn’t about you. It’s about that.” He jabbed a finger toward the window, toward the city beyond. “The place we both love. I’m not your motherfucking muse. I’m just another pair of hands.”

The silence between them thickened. “That night you stooped to an old black blind man seated on a subway grate and asked him if he needed help—what did I say to you?”

“Don’t we all?”

“Don’t we all. *Don’t we all!* I thank you for everything, Mr. Van Alen. And I bless you from the bottom of my heart.” Solomon exhaled. “But, I should go,” he muttered.

Elliot’s chest seized. He saw it then—the walls he’d built, not just around his apartment but around himself, a fortress of privilege and solitude that had kept him safe, kept him separate. Solomon’s words sliced through: *needing me*. He’d spent his life distancing, because needing anyone felt like weakness, a crack in the Van Alen armor. But that night, something had shifted. He’d walked out into the cold, restless, not knowing why, and found Solomon—someone unlike him, someone who saw the world he’d stopped seeing. That moment had cracked him open, and Solomon had been pouring light through ever since.

“Wait,” Elliot said, voice rough, stepping forward. Solomon paused, half-turned, his silhouette framed by the doorway’s dim glow. “Don’t go. Please.”

Solomon’s brow lifted, but he didn’t move.

“You’re right,” Elliot said, the words spilling out. “I’ve been scared. Scared of needing you, scared of what it means that I can’t do this alone. I’ve got this name, this life, and I’ve used it to keep everyone out. But that night—I didn’t know it then, but I was looking for

something. Someone. And you were there. You've been there, seeing what I couldn't, and I've been too damn proud to say it: I need you. This tower—it's not mine. It's ours. And I'm grateful, Solomon. More than I know how to tell you."

Solomon stood still, his cloudy eyes unreadable, then a faint smile tugged at his lips. "Gratitude's a start," he said, his voice softening. "Awareness is better. You're waking up, Van Alen. That's enough for tonight." He tapped his cane once more, a deliberate beat, and stepped back into the room. "Now, let's talk about that tower. It's still gotta sing."

The Van Alen Building rose over the next year, a structure unlike any Elliot had dreamed before—a sinuous tower of glass and steel, its base flared to embrace the street, its upper reaches rippling like a caught breath. The critics called it a revelation, a dance of form and function, but Elliot knew its heartbeat: Solomon's rhythm, woven into every line. The Flatiron's lesson lived there—the way it channeled the city's howl through acoustic veins, letting the wind sing against its skin. It wasn't timeless; it was alive, a testament to two men who'd found each other in the city's churn.

Solomon stayed—nights at the diner turned to nights in Elliot's apartment, sketching by sound while Elliot traced the lines. Their friendship grew, a quiet thing of coffee and arguments, laughter and silences that needed no filling. When the tower opened, they stood together on its top floor, the city sprawling below, and Solomon's hand rested on Elliot's shoulder, a steady weight. "We did this," he said, and Elliot nodded, feeling the truth of it down to his bones. The Van Alen name glittered on the plaque, but Solomon's echo rang louder, a pulse that would hum through the steel long after they were gone—a connection as enduring as the city itself.

INNOCENT BYSTANDER

Foghorns moaned low across the Hudson as first light strained against heavy clouds, draped like wet cloth over the tenement buildings along MacDougal Street. On the third floor, in a narrow kitchen with a view of Passanante's Ballfield, the morning chill seeped under the windowsills, threading its way into the bones of the small apartment where Julie lived.

From her window, she saw a cluster of figures in the field on Houston Street—practicing *Tai chi* in the mist, their slow, deliberate movements blurred into abstraction. They moved like ghosts, rehearsing something ancient and private. Further off, the Twin Towers were lost in fog, their presence felt more than seen. She loved mornings like this.

But then she opened the refrigerator and realized she was out of coffee.

A sharp, deliberate knock came at the door. Not the kind of knock that allowed for hesitation.

Through the peephole: Ennio, her upstairs neighbor. He stood with a silver pot of espresso, balanced precariously on a scratched metal tray. His frame was slight, permanently hunched at the shoulders, as if decades of crouching beside tables had left him in a state of cautious readiness. His hair, once dark, now clung in wisps to the sides of his scalp, leaving the crown smooth and pale. The lines around his eyes suggested a life lived in perpetual dimness—under soft lights, behind steaming plates, always observing, never quite seen.

He had been a waiter at Joe's for longer than anyone remembered. Never promoted, never replaced. A fixture. The kind of man who knew the dining room's temperature just by stepping through the kitchen door. Affable in the way that earned trust, but never invited intimacy.

She opened the door. Ennio entered as if by ritual, the pot rattling slightly on the tray.

"You knew I was out of coffee, Ennio!"

"No surprise, Julie."

They sat at the kitchen table in silence, sipping espresso edged with anisette. The morning felt stretched thin—soundless and slow.

Then Ennio spoke: "Did you hear the explosion last night?"

The words dropped like a plate, sudden and sharp.

"I thought it was thunder," she said, though even she wasn't sure.

Ennio shook his head. "They threw a stick of dynamite through Joe's front door. Blew the door off the hinges."

Her stomach tightened. "*What?! WHO?!*"

He hesitated. Then: "Who else. *You know*. Someone overheard something about a wiretap."

“A wiretap? In Joe’s?”

“Someone’s idea of a joke. Guess who didn’t find it funny?” And with that, he pointed to his chin.

Julie’s eyes widened.

A small, precise gesture—two fingers tapped once beneath his jaw. That was all. No further explanation. No need.

She understood. She had worked coat-check at Joe’s long enough to know the language. Threats weren’t shouted. They were whispered or gestured. A glance, a tilt of the head, a finger to the chin. The unspoken always weighed more.

“Did anyone get hurt?” Julie asked.

Ennio stood. “I don’t ask questions. Nick called me this morning and said, ‘Pretend this didn’t happen.’ No police, forget it. So I’m only telling you. I don’t know anything. You know how these people are. Nick doesn’t want to make things worse.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do? I’m gonna go downstairs and clean it up,” he said. “You’re lucky the weather is warm; there are no coats to hang tonight. We’ll get someone from Canal Street to put in a new door before Nick gets in, and everyone will go about their business as normal.”

A moment later, Ennio was gone, the door closing with a sound that lingered longer than it should have.

Julie remained at the table, the last of the espresso gone cold in her cup. The anisette still touched her tongue—sweet, sharp, like something remembered too late.

The air in the kitchen had thickened as Julie visualized the shards of glass Ennio went to remove from the street. He would replace the

door before the chef arrived. By dinner, the story would be reduced to a murmur, she imagined. For most, it would pass like the weather.

But for others? No. In the South Village, where a particular criminal element was organized, storms never passed. They paused. They waited.

The gesture to the chin—so small, so absolute—echoed louder than the blast. Power here didn't raise its voice. It moved in silence, in implication. A name left unsaid. A look held one second too long. She had seen it all, as an innocent bystander, from behind the coat rack: men who barely spoke, but rearranged a room by stepping into it.

What happened last night was no accident. It was a correction.

Julie rose and moved to the window. The fog had begun to lift.

There, in the distance, the Twin Towers stood—impossibly tall, stoic as monuments. Ultra-modern compared to the dingy tenements in its distant shadow. A decade from that morning, a crystal clear day in the future, the World Trade Center would be gone.

Julie didn't know what stirred the thought—perhaps it was the violence just below her window, a stick of dynamite flung at a restaurant door while the city slept. Or the silence that followed, too complete to trust. Or the way the fog pulled back from the towers, revealing them slowly, as if deciding whether to show them at all. For a moment, something passed through her—not prophecy, not fear exactly, but a flicker of awareness she couldn't name. The sense that permanence was an illusion. That even the tallest things could fall. That what appeared fixed was already shifting. The city, stripped of its disguises, revealed itself for what it had always been: provisional. Flammable. Never truly safe.

Her thoughts returned to the gesture Ennio made. Two fingers to the chin. A code. A sentence made of silence. It had contained danger, yes, but also clarity. She knew what it meant. Knew the shape of the

threat, the contours of its logic. There was something almost reassuring in that. In a world fraying at its edges, the gesture was solid.

It was enough to give her something to lean on.

Soon, the streets would fill. Plates would be served. Jokes would be exchanged at the bar. But beneath it all—the fire escapes, the stoops, the flicker of neon in wet pavement—was the knowledge of things unspoken. A balance held in place by invisible weights.

Julie set the cups and espresso pot in the sink, unwashed. Outside her window, the towers had fully emerged from the mist. Sharp-edged, pale as bone. Their mirrored faces held the morning light, reflecting a city that rarely returned the gaze.

She saw them go up decades earlier. And little did she know, she'd see them come down a decade from now.

But on mornings like this, the Towers seemed part of the weather. Present, but untouched. Watchtowers, perhaps, though they watched nothing. Not the petty vendettas of small men. Not the damage left behind. Not the silence that followed.

They were innocent observers. Like her. Bystanders to the slow unraveling of other people's wars.

She pressed her forehead to the glass of her kitchen window.

Outside, the city resumed its rhythm. Below, Joe's would reopen. The weather would turn. Winter would come. The coats would be hung. Ennio, with his usual careful deference, would show men of silent gestures to their seats.

And the Towers—like Julie—would watch over it all.

FLATIRON

Not long ago, I found myself in a forgotten friend's loft, unsure of how I had arrived. The place felt more like the ruins of an obsession than someone's home. Paintings were scattered with reckless abandon—against walls, windows, furniture, and across the floor as if the space had surrendered itself to them. Each canvas pulsed with color, fractured yet deliberate, a chaotic hymn to one of New York's most iconic landmarks: the Flatiron Building, which loomed like a ghost outside the loft's floor-to-ceiling windows.

Minutes stretched, then folded in on themselves, as I wandered between the canvases. An hour slipped, maybe two; I had no idea how much time had passed.

All the while, the artist, Jerry Greenberg, stood over my shoulder, breathing through his nose like a bull that had just crossed the finish line at Pamplona.

This was his life's work, a syncopation of otherworldly retro-futurism, a pandemonium entirely his own.

Greenberg himself was a paradoxical chap. His wealth afforded him the luxury of masquerading as a bohemian, yet he lived like a king, with a king-sized view of the Flatiron. He was the sort who craved fame yet despised its superficiality. The sort who saw himself as misunderstood yet took pride in just how misunderstood he was.

For him, art transcended Warhol's quip, "Art is what you can get away with." Each brushstroke carried existential weight—a puzzle he alone was destined to solve. The toll of this pursuit was etched in his scowl, a silent testament to his simmering frustration. He was a character, strutting about in a full-length paint-splattered smock, a wool scarf an old girlfriend had knitted, and a pair of Converse high-tops.

"I don't recall ever seeing anything so familiar, yet so utterly strange," I admitted, my voice barely more than a whisper. It was as if I had stepped into a memory I had never lived—something known, yet unknowable. The paintings, the Flatiron beyond the window, even the air itself felt charged with a presence I couldn't quite place, as if I were witnessing something I had seen a thousand times before but was only now truly seeing for the first time.

Greenberg's lips curled into a secretive smile.

"I paint only the Flatiron," he said. "It's all I see. It's all I want to see. And to truly see the Flatiron, I must see it for the first time every time."

My connection to Greenberg was a passing chapter in a New York minute—our acquaintance a byproduct of his ties to Alex Alessi, my forgotten friend.

I hadn't seen Alex in years. At some point, I'd realized I must have sought him out on a whim earlier in the day. I suppose I had nothing better to do than to be carried by the city's timeless pulse, but Alex wasn't there when I arrived. He was just a name lingering on the intercom.

“Alex is gone. Where have you been?” Greenberg sneered after he answered the door and gave me the once-over.

It was one of those New York things—time passing unnoticed until, all at once, it was apparent. I recalled a New Year’s Eve party here. I thought then the loft’s floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the Flatiron precisely seemed fated to be an artist’s muse.

“Most people think they’re looking at an optical illusion,” Greenberg said of his work. “But even that’s not real.”

“You mean the illusion itself is an illusion?”

“I’m saying I’m not sure if what exists outside my window is even there.”

“No, it’s there. I just walked past it,” I said, unsure if Greenberg was half-joking.

“Don’t patronize me,” he said, dead serious.

“I was on my way here, and I looked up at it—”

“—and your mind registered it as the Flatiron, because it always has.”

“I then walked by it. Crossed the street.”

Greenberg shook his head. “You may have thought you walked by it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Of course, you walked by it—millions of people do. But don’t pretend you can see something that isn’t there.”

I let out a laugh. “I’m not following. Are you saying consciousness itself... is an illusion?”

“Yes, but I can’t speak for you.”

I sighed. “The illusion of the Flatiron isn’t that it isn’t there. It’s that it’s flat.”

Greenberg’s eyes flickered. “How would you know that?”

“I can see it with my own eyes!”

“Have you ever been on the other side?”

“Of course I have.”

“At the same time?”

I frowned. “That’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

“You’re either on one side or the other.”

“Then tell me—which side were you on? The long side? Or the short?”

I hesitated. I had no idea.

“To some, the Flatiron is a 12-5-13 Pythagorean triangle,” he continued. “A long side. A short side. So? Which side were you on?”

“How would I know?”

“Ah. Now we’re getting somewhere! If you don’t even know which side you were on, how can you be certain there is another side? To some, it’s a triangle. To others, a flat, one-sided structure that exists only in theory. And if it only exists in theory, how can anyone be sure it exists at all?”

At the risk of sounding like a tramp in a Beckett play, I responded accordingly. “Forget how many sides there are—or aren’t. If I walked by it, and millions of others walked by it—but it isn’t there—then what do you see when you look out your window?”

Greenberg took a moment, nodding as if I had just proven his point.

“Let’s say the mind registers it as real. Or maybe as something that appears real—like a rainbow.”

“But we’re not talking about a rainbow!”

“Which is why it’s worse! A rainbow at least acknowledges its own fraudulence! The Flatiron just *stands there*, pretending to be *real*!”

I let his absurd notion linger.

“Are you saying the Flatiron Triangle is New York’s version of the Bermuda Triangle?”

“No, jackass,” Greenberg snapped. “I’m saying I paint the Flatiron to prove to myself that it’s there.”

Greenberg saw metaphors in everything—graffiti-covered walls, discarded objects, the Flatiron itself. And he expected the rest of the world to, as well.

“You ever read up on Pataphysics? The science of imaginary solutions?”

“Sounds like pretentious bullshit.”

“Exactly! It’s the most sophisticated pretentious bullshit ever conceived! It’s the paradox of contradictions! The answers to problems no one asks! A system built to explain the unexplainable, measure what can’t be measured, and solve what doesn’t need solving.”

Greenberg’s words hung in the air, heavy with meaninglessness.

The concept of imaginary solutions sounded like a smokescreen conjured by a delusional postmodern conman. Then again, an imaginary solution only suggests the possibility of an alternate one—and an alternate one does not necessarily negate a valid one.

The Flatiron itself seemed to whisper that every story had at least three sides. Was it a building? An idea? A shape people accepted

without question? A long side, a short side, a hypotenuse—the mind registered its geometry without hesitation. But to stand on both sides at once? Impossible. As such, the Flatiron could be, in theory, both real and unreal.

Greenberg studied me, then changed the subject. “Wanna get high?”

I smirked. “I assumed you were already high.”

“Don’t be cute. Do you wanna get fuckin’ high or not?”

I didn’t answer. He took that as a yes.

I came looking for someone else, an old friend. And you know what they say when you begin dredging up the past. You wind up chasing ghosts. So there I was, feeling very much like a ghost myself, who, by looking for one ghost, ended up being entertained by another ghost.

We sat among his canvases, the air thick with the scent of turpentine. Greenberg lit the bong, inhaled deeply, and exhaled a cloud that curled toward the ceiling.

“You and Alessi have a rift or something?” he muttered.

“I wouldn’t call it a rift. Things were said. We drifted apart.”

“So it was a drift, not a rift?”

“He was successful early on. I was struggling. You know how that goes.”

“Well, I have no idea where he is. Off to find himself, I guess. Europe, Asia, South America—he could be anywhere.”

“What’s his name still doing on the intercom downstairs?”

“He never officially moved out.”

“So, do you sublet from him?”

Greenberg sighed. “Yo, this is New York. People like to be left alone. They don’t want bounty hunters coming after them.”

“I’m just asking. Alessi and I were close once.”

Greenberg waved a hand dismissively. “Look, Alessi’s got more money than God, and I’ve got more money than God. Do the math.”

At that moment, amidst the canvases and clutter, I made a connection with Greenberg that defied explanation—a connection forged through the unending quest to understand what more money than God actually meant.

I leaned against a table. Greenberg, who had more money than God, lounged on a battered sofa that bore the weight of restless nights and, quite frankly, smelled funky even at a distance.

A stack of dog-eared philosophy books sat on the floor beside him. He took another hit.

“We never really hung out, did we?” Greenberg said, blowing smoke.

“I was the one lurking at Alex’s get-togethers. I always wanted to open an art gallery.”

Greenberg squinted at me. “I remember you now. But not quite.”

“Nice to be remembered for not being remembered.”

“Funny. You remind me of Alex. Both of you are sarcastic as fuck.”

“Alex was going to back me.”

“The art gallery?”

“Yeah. But it was just talk, I suppose.”

Greenberg studied me, then asked, “How close were you with Alex?”

“Inseparable, once upon a time.” I hesitated. “Did Alex ever tell you

the story about his great-grandfather? He worked construction on the Flatiron.”

Greenberg exhaled, rubbing a hand over his face. “Alex’s great-grandfather,” he repeated, as if weighing the name. His usual sharpness wavered, replaced by something more introspective. “I don’t know, man. If this is some Ellis Island tale, I’m not sure what it has to do with—” He stopped himself, sighing. “Go on.”

I studied him, surprised. “Only if you’re really interested in imaginary solutions.”

Greenberg sat up. I nodded, choosing my words carefully.

“For Alex’s great-grandfather, the Flatiron wasn’t just a building. Laying its foundation, carving its bones—it was an immigrant’s rite of passage, proof that he belonged here. But somewhere along the way, the story of what happened during the construction of the Flatiron shifted, got twisted, and blurred. I’m talking about the deaths of dozens of immigrant laborers. That never happened.”

Greenberg watched me closely now, “I’m not interested in something that never happened.”

Greenberg took a deep breath and softened. “I didn’t mean to be an asshole. Jews, Italians—we all have stories, we all have scars.” His voice dropped. “Half my mother’s family was wiped out in Auschwitz.”

I felt the weight of it. “I’m sorry.”

“But that happened.”

Silence settled between us.

I shifted in my seat. “You ever hear about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire? 1911. One hundred forty-six people, mostly women, trapped. Killed.”

Greenberg exhaled sharply. “Yeah, I have. Horrific.”

I hesitated. “Alex’s great-grandfather told his grandfather, who told his father, who told Alex, that men were buried alive during the Flatiron’s construction in 1902.”

Greenberg’s expression changed. His usual air of detachment wavered.

“The Triangle Shirtwaist fire was front-page news,” I continued. “But there’s no record of workers being buried alive while constructing the Flatiron.”

Greenberg held my gaze for a long moment. He turned slowly toward the Flatiron, as if waiting for it to offer an answer.

I pressed on. “Alex’s great-grandfather didn’t speak English. His grandfather barely made it out of grade school. So whatever was passed down—through the generations—might have been a misinterpretation of events.”

Greenberg’s jaw tightened. “It either happened, or it didn’t. No language barrier can misinterpret one for the other.”

“That’s what Alex thought. He spent weeks reviewing old newspapers and historical records. The Fuller Building, as it was originally called, never reported an accident that killed anyone.”

A flicker of something crossed Greenberg’s face—not skepticism, but recognition.

“So you’re saying the old man mistook the Waistcoat Factory fire for—wait a minute,” he said, his voice suddenly unsteady. “I’ve had nightmares about this—recurring nightmares. I’ve had these nightmares even before I started living here. And since living here ...”

He stood, his movements sharp, agitated. “No. I think Alessi’s great-grandfather saw something.”

A cold weight settled in my chest. “What are you saying?”

Greenberg raked a hand through his hair, his breath uneven. “I don’t know. I don’t fucking know. But I swear on my soul—I’ve seen what he —”

The room felt smaller. Tighter.

“Who sent you here?” Greenberg snapped, out of the blue.

The question cut through me like a blade.

What was I doing here? And why was I remembering all of this now?

“I told you—I came to visit Alex.”

Greenberg shook his head, eyes unfocused. “I’m having an out-of-body experience. I dreamt this. It’s like you’re burrowing into my head and pulling it out!”

He spun, clutching his skull. “I might even be dreaming right now! Don’t go anywhere—I need to show you something.”

He rushed across the loft, rifling through a rack of unfinished paintings.

“This is my nightmare.”

He yanked out a painting and turned it toward me.

I went cold.

The image was uncannily precise—mourners or laborers, or some combination of both, dressed in black frocks, standing over mounds of sand and ash.

A trench. A collapse. A burial.

Greenberg’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “Tell me I’m a madman! But I’ve seen this in my dreams! It happens the same way every time.

A trench caves in. Immigrant workers, buried alive. Their muffled screams, the suffocating dirt.”

He swallowed. “And then I hear music.”

I barely breathed. “Music?”

“Dancing. Singing. It’s New Year’s Eve at midnight.”

I shivered.

“There was a ballroom in the basement of the Flatiron when it opened,” he continued. “They were buried beneath the ballroom.”

He looked at me now, his face pale, his certainty terrifying.

“Then I wake up, go to the window, and see nothing but a mound of sand and ash.”

The room seemed to tilt.

Greenberg collapsed onto the battered sofa. He grabbed the bong and took a long, slow hit, exhaling through his nose like a man trying to calm himself down.

I stared at him, his paintings, and the Flatiron beyond the window.

A story passed down through generations—one that history had either erased or never recorded at all. Real or imagined. And if imagined, for what purpose?

And yet, I felt its presence.

Just as one could see the Flatiron in different ways—either as a triumph of architecture or a monument to an untold tragedy.

A triangle with long and short sides.

It’s all about perspective.

Greenberg let out a breath, voice softer now. “Nice to be remembered for not being remembered.”

I blinked. “What?”

“What you said before. ‘It’s nice to be remembered for not being remembered.’ I like that. I might have use for it somewhere. Do you mind? I’ll give you credit. What did you say your name was again?”

I hesitated. Then, quietly: “I didn’t say. Best to be unknown than never remembered.”

As I left Greenberg’s loft, I asked him to call me if Alex ever reappeared.

“Maybe we’ll all go out for dinner,” I suggested.

Greenberg scoffed. “I haven’t been to dinner since the Twin Towers collapsed.”

Outside, I looked up at his windows from the sidewalk, trying to see what Greenberg saw. Then I turned to the Flatiron.

The sun bathed its upper floors in golden light. But at the street level, the wind howled, slicing through the narrow intersection like a blade. For a moment—just a moment—I thought I heard something in the wind.

Whispers.

Cries.

Music.

Right where the wind split in two along the Flatiron’s protruding edge.

I decided to walk around it. A full circle. To see it whole for the first time in a long time. Maybe even for the first time. Which side was the long side and which was the short side?

I counted my paces as I moved north along Fifth.

FLATIRON

As I turned the corner, the wind picked up, howling through the canyon of buildings. I struggled to keep my footing.

They used to say the Flatiron's draft would lift women's skirts. That men would be blown off their heels.

I had all I could do to stay upright.

My mind went dim.

I lost count of my steps.

By the time I circled back to my starting point, something felt... off.

I couldn't explain it.

I turned back toward Greenberg's building—drawn by something beyond logic.

I should have retraced my steps more precisely. Should have counted them again.

But instead, I crossed the street and headed for the entrance.

Something shifted.

The air around me.

The feeling of it.

I stepped inside.

And then I saw it.

On the intercom.

A name I recognized immediately.

Alex Alessi.

But how?

My heart pounded.

I called the concierge. “Mr. Borges?”

“Ah! Señor Alessi!” He sounded delighted. “It’s so nice to hear your voice again! When did you return?”

I felt a wave of dizziness.

“I... I’m sorry?”

“It’s been a long time, no? It’s good to get away. It gives you a new perspective.”

“Yes,” I murmured. “It does.”

“Did you enjoy Buenos Aires? I don’t return often enough myself. But do not worry, Señor Alessi! Everything is just as you left it.”

I swallowed.

“How did I... get home, Mr. Borges?”

He chuckled. “What do you mean, Señor? Do you need help with your luggages?” He always mispronounced luggage as luggages.

It made me feel right at home.

“No,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you, Mr. Borges.”

I stepped into the elevator.

The ride felt longer than I remembered.

When the doors finally slid open, I fumbled for my keys.

They fit the lock.

I turned the handle.

The loft was just as I had left it.

I crossed the room and drew open the curtains.

FLATIRON

And there it was.

The Flatiron.

Always there. Never there.

A triangle with long and short sides.

It was all about perspective.

Generations ago, my great-grandfather, an Italian immigrant, played a role in constructing the Flatiron Building in 1902. His young wife—my great-grandmother—would later perish in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. Over time, the two events became intertwined in my family's retelling, history blurring into myth. Decades later, it fell upon me to untangle the threads.

When I shared the story with Jerry Greenberg—an artist who once crashed at my loft—he became obsessed. His imagination seized on the idea of men buried alive beneath the Flatiron, and soon, his canvases bore scenes of mourning laborers, ghostly figures entombed in ash and sand. Jerry had always sought to extract meaning from absence; perhaps his own family's past—marked by loss in the Holocaust—made him more attuned to history's distortions.

Despite our differences—me, born into wealth and pragmatism, him, a restless artist chasing transcendence—we had once been inseparable. Our friendship thrived on long conversations, philosophical debates, and shared dreams. But as time passed, so did we.

Before he disappeared from my life, Jerry confided that he didn't want to be overt in depicting loss—it was always there without being there. The past is inescapable, he said.

His words lingered, forcing me to reconsider my own inheritance. Had my great-grandfather rewritten his past, just as Jerry reshaped

his nightmares into art? Perhaps, in telling himself a different version of history, he had found a way to live with it.

Sometimes, Jerry and I saw eye to eye, and our perspectives aligned. Other times, we looked at the same thing and saw something else entirely.

As I gazed down at the street below, a dark figure, his smock whipping in the wind like a tattered flag, stood at the base of the Flatiron. He moved methodically, counting his steps—one by one.

And then—he was gone, swallowed by the recesses of the building.

Jerry's voice echoed in my mind, a lingering meditation on time, memory, and perception.

I turned from the window.

And I remembered—I was home.

CITY OF ALLEGORIES

LESSONS AND LAMENTS

“Once in New York, you are sure to be a great success. I know lots of people there who would give a hundred thousand dollars to have a grandfather, and much more than that to have a family ghost.”

— **Oscar Wilde, The Canterville Ghost**

THE WINDOW CLEANER

New York Chronicle

Mid-City Desk—July 13th, 2024

By Staff Columnist

Paul Anthony “Paulie” Macaluso, 58, Long Island City, was attacked and found barely conscious on the edge of the F train platform at 42nd Street-Bryant Park Station late last month. Emergency services arrived within minutes. Transit Authority cameras confirm the attack: three young men approached Mr. Macaluso, exchanged words, and then assaulted him. No eyewitnesses. The assailants are still at large.

Macaluso was taken to Bellevue. He died two days later.

Why it happened is a story as strange as it is tragic...a story born of loneliness, misunderstanding, and a city that confuses spectacle for truth—and tramples a man beneath both.

Paulie Macaluso was a high-rise window cleaner by trade, following in his father’s footsteps. The elder Macaluso taught him the essen-

tials of the job: how to steady himself on a scaffold, how to maneuver a squeegee against glass, and how to compose himself when the city vanished beneath his feet. For a young man with little formal education, the work offered both purpose and a sense of freedom. It was the only job he ever wanted—and the only one he ever held.

For thirty years, Paulie cleaned other people's reflections. Buildings whose names spent more on signage than he earned in a year. He watched the city change: the cranes, the towers, the neon glass, the river of lights at night. But the job stayed the same: harness on, descend into the abyss, scrub, rinse, squeegee, etc.

Over time, the job no longer thrilled him so much as dislocated him. The wind pulled at joints that had become heavier than the harness. The floors whose views once exhilarated now seemed like mirrors of something empty. He began drinking after hours—first to celebrate the day's job, then to blur the edge of his mind, then to stop thinking at all.

His wife, Celia, died during the pandemic months in 2020. She left without a goodbye. Paulie didn't cry much. He cleaned windows. He drank. He remembered. He mourned in his own way. But he kept drinking.

One late afternoon in early June, while halfway up a spiraling 88-floor tower called The Helix, Paulie saw something he couldn't explain. As the sun came from the west, it turned every window into a bronze mirror, and the wind whistled beneath his scaffold, he had a "vision."

It wasn't sharp. It hovered at the edge of something. He thought at first it was a trick of light. A distortion from the warped panel. As he reached to wipe the glass, a figure materialized. Not behind the glass, *in* it. A woman he recognized. A face he remembered from the last time he saw her. Celia. His wife. *In the glass*. Her gaze met his—

THE WINDOW CLEANER

steady, unblinking. She pressed one hand to the glass as though the barrier between her world and his had thinned. Paulie froze. The squeegee he held slipped from his grip. He swore he felt the glass shiver.

And then, just as mysteriously as she appeared, she was gone.

Paulie climbed down. His foreman, Miguel, saw something in his face. Paulie muttered something about seeing something and his mind playing tricks on him. Miguel listened. Paulie might have said something he shouldn't have. Something like:

"I think I saw the Virgin Mary."

Miguel, who wasn't religious but was raised on candlelit novenas and a mother and *abuelas* who kept plastic saints above the stove, went quiet. The Virgin meant something.

"You serious?" he asked.

Paulie nodded once. "Yeah. She was just... there." At that point, someone nearby overheard and asked for more. Paulie shrugged and recounted in detail what he saw—swapping his wife for the Virgin Mary. Soon, a small crowd gathered. Paulie told everyone he was shaken, that he had quit drinking, and his mind wasn't right.

He must have been convincing because everyone bought it even as Paulie was misleading them. He saw Celia. And he hadn't quit drinking. He lied. And he wasn't sure why.

Perhaps his shame ran deeper than even he knew.

He never forgave himself for how it ended.

To admit that he saw Celia—that her presence had appeared to him on a window hovering 47 floors above midtown Manhattan—was unbearable. It would unmake him. Apparently, it already had.

But he needed to *say something*. Needed Miguel and the others to believe he had seen something sacred, even if it was built on a lie.

And so, he reached for the only name that could shoulder the weight.

The Virgin Mary.

Paulie thought it would end there. But that was only the beginning of the end.

Later that night, Paulie sat alone in O'Connor's at 43rd and Lexington—the kind of Midtown bar that welcomes the invisible. Shots went down in dim light. He stared at the mirror behind the liquor bottles and watched his face dissolve in the reflection. He was drinking to blur the edges of the vision, to keep it locked in the dark.

What he remembered most clearly wasn't the whole figure in the glass. It was the split second before he realized who it was. Suspended forty-seven floors up on the scaffold of the Helix, sunlight bronzed the pane, wind rattled the cables beneath his boots, and for one heartbeat, he believed the figure in the glass was the Virgin Mary—her robes, her stillness, the quiet authority in her gesture.

Then the illusion cracked.

Her coat—it was the one Celia wore years ago. The tilt of her head. The way she pressed her hand to the glass. In that moment, the Virgin vanished, and the face of his wife, his fault, his loss, stood before him instead.

He didn't tell Miguel that. He told him the Virgin Mary. Because in that initial heartbeat, he *did* believe it. But when the truth settled in—he saw Celia, not a saint—he buried that memory. What he confessed publicly was a vision of holiness; privately, he carried guilt.

Paulie replayed that split second again and again as he drank to disassociate. Because confession wasn't about the apparition—it

THE WINDOW CLEANER

was about the man in the harness, the man who lost his wife, the man who told a story that no longer belonged to him.

As such, the story leaked within days. Not from Paulie. He kept his mouth shut. But Father Domenico, of St. Francis on 31st Street, got a call from Paulie's foreman, Miguel. The priest asked a few questions, made a few notes, then quietly started talking in parish circles: "A window-washer of no account claims to have seen something. Not a vision, just an occurrence in the glass of The Helix." The name *Paulie Macaluso* remained buried. The idea took wing. The rumor found traction.

A theology student at Fordham uploaded a screenshot of a message thread titled "*Miracle at The Helix?*" with a single word: **interesting**. The email chain that followed moved faster than subway gossip—first among seminarians and laypeople, then to neighborhood parish groups, then further. The whispers became headlines no one dared print, yet everyone repeated.

Paulie's name, once barely spoken beyond his crew, now moved through corners of the city he'd never visited.

At first, he felt relief. They thought it was Mary. Not Celia. Not the face he had abandoned, the life he'd failed. The lie had given his guilt a mask, and the world had chosen to believe it.

But relief soured.

Because the louder the voices became, the closer came the day when someone would ask him—on record, on tape, in front of a crowd—what he saw. And he'd have to lie again. Or confess.

The weight of that choice became unbearable.

He had scaled buildings in hurricane-like winds. Had dangled from steel at dizzying heights. But nothing felt as precarious as the silence he now carried.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

Because if he admitted what he *truly* saw—that it wasn't the Virgin, that it was a woman he'd wronged, a ghost he'd never buried.

Either way, the story was no longer his.

It belonged to the city now.

Then came the night on the platform.

Paulie waited for the F train after a long night at O'Connor's. The train was late. The platform hummed with the usual static.

Three young men were at the far end of the subway platform. Not threatening at first glance. Hooded sweatshirts, ball caps, the bored energy of the underemployed. They were watching him.

He heard laughter—muffled, then louder.

"Yo, that's him."

Paulie shifted on his feet.

"Saint Glass, right?" one said. "The holy squeegee?"

More laughter.

Paulie turned, tried to move away, but their steps caught up with him.

"Don't walk away, prophet. You saw her, right? That's what they're saying. You saw the Virgin and what—decided to keep it to yourself?"

Paulie kept his voice low. "I didn't want to tell anybody."

"Exactly," one snapped, stepping in front of him. "That's the problem. That's what we're saying."

A second voice, sharper: "People out here are looking for something real, and you—you go hiding it in a bar?"

THE WINDOW CLEANER

Paulie blinked, not at their faces but past them—at the far end of the track, where the rails met the dark.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter what you asked for,” the first one said.

Paulie opened his mouth to speak, but there was no time. The third boy—the quiet one—moved with sudden, rehearsed force. A fist, hard and fast, struck Paulie square in the ribs. He staggered sideways, caught off-balance, and went down hard on the cement. His cheek kissed the platform tile. The smell of rubber and urine rose in his nose.

No one moved.

The gang didn’t flee. They just walked away, casual, like they’d said their piece. The train lights flickered into view down the tunnel, slow and distant.

Paulie was rescued minutes later. The ambulance came. He told an EMT, “For a split second, I thought I saw the Virgin.” The EMT nodded: “You may have a concussion, Mr. Macaluso. Best not to talk.” Paulie’s voice cracked.

In the final hours of his life, Paulie Macaluso lay hooked to a slow-beeping monitor in a corner room at Bellevue. His ribs were broken. Blood had pooled in his lungs. The EMTs said he nearly died on the platform. Maybe he had. Maybe something in him gave up then and there, and the rest was just waiting.

Father Domenico sat at Paulie’s bedside as the skyline bruised with dusk. The window, narrow and high, framed the last violet light over the East River.

Paulie spoke—his voice barely audible.

“I didn’t want to share what I really saw. Celia was mine.”

The priest didn't respond immediately. He let the words settle.

Finally, he said, "The deepest wounds rarely want witness. But you weren't meant to carry it alone."

Paulie turned his head toward the window. And then, with the last of his strength, Paulie confessed.

Not everything—but enough. Enough to release the weight of it, to let the truth stand unguarded.

He hadn't seen the Virgin.

He'd seen Celia and didn't want to believe it.

The vision had come in the warped reflection of a 47th-floor pane—his dead wife, exactly as she looked before the sickness. The coat she wore. The tilt of her head. The quiet way she forgave him by not saying a word. He couldn't tell Miguel. And not anyone else. Not even himself, not fully. So he lied.

He called it holy because it felt holy. Because grief, when it returns unannounced, can feel divine.

"I never thought it'd get out," he said. "Never thought it'd become... this."

It had.

Paulie Macaluso died two days later, quietly. No headline. No funeral. Just a note from the hospital and a few phone calls. The priest wrote his name in the book of the dead. Miguel paid for the cremation.

A story that began on a scaffold ended on a subway platform.

The City Moves On

Paulie Macaluso was not a prophet. Not a martyr.

THE WINDOW CLEANER

He was a man who saw something he couldn't live with and told a story he never meant to escape him.

What he wanted was privacy. What he carried was grief.

He wanted the weight of his past—of Celia, of silence—to be his alone.

But New York, that machine of longing and spectacle, has no patience for private pain.

Paulie Macaluso wasn't chosen.

He was taken.

SUTTLE HOUSE

We Cannot Be Certain Which Is Which

In the winter of 1895, when New York society had perfected the art of spending money as quickly as fortunes could be made, Mr. Nathaniel Suttle occupied a house on Fifth Avenue between 62nd and 63rd Streets—not quite close enough to the Vanderbilts to cause awkwardness, but near enough to borrow their social cachet when the occasion demanded.

Nathaniel had made his fortune in railway stock and copper mines, which is to say he had made it the same way everyone else had: through a combination of ruthless speculation and the careful cultivation of politicians who could be bought for the price of a dinner at Delmonico's. He was forty-two, handsome in the way of men who employ excellent tailors, and possessed of that peculiar American quality of appearing earnest while being entirely calculated.

His wife, Mrs. Prudence Suttle, was everything a Fifth Avenue mansion required: decorative, expensive, and prone to mysterious absences. Her twin sister, Miss Abigail Suttle, was identical in every

respect save one—she had the good sense never to marry anybody, a decision that society found either admirably modern or suspiciously Continental, depending on who was doing the gossiping at Mrs. Astor’s Monday evening receptions.

The twins were twenty-eight years old in that winter of 1895, though Prudence insisted she was still twenty-seven while Abigail claimed to be twenty-nine, which tells you everything you need to know about their relationship with truth. They had been born in Philadelphia—that city of Quakers and new money trying desperately to become old money—to a family whose fortune came from textiles and whose respectability came from forgetting how the fortune had been made.

Both sisters possessed what Dr. Francis Delafield of Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons delicately termed “congenital monocular amblyopia,” though Prudence preferred to call it “selective sight,” as it excused so much. Prudence could see only from her left eye, Abigail only from her right. When they stood face to face, each twin’s good eye gazed directly into her sister’s blind one—an arrangement that Abigail claimed was “the perfect metaphor for sisterhood,” and which Prudence found “dreadfully inconvenient for detecting lies.”

“We need both our eyes to keep an eye on you, dear Nathaniel,” they would say in unison at dinner parties, which Nathaniel found charming until he realized they might be serious.

The three resided at Suttle House, which the architect Stanford White had designed in 1889 in what he called “French Renaissance Revival” and what everyone else called “expensive,” with the harmonious dysfunction of a Swiss clock wound backward. The house featured a limestone facade, a porte-cochère for carriages, and enough gilt-edged mirrors to satisfy even the most narcissistic of Fifth Avenue matrons.

Abigail, who had vowed never to marry because “one can be faithless to a husband but never to one’s travel itinerary,” maintained a suite of rooms on the third floor between her expeditions to Tunisia, Madagascar, and other places where society’s rules had not yet been properly established. She had just returned from six months in Cairo, where she claimed to have taken tea with Lord Cromer and explored the tombs at Saqqara, though whether any of this was true was impossible to verify—which was, of course, precisely what made it enjoyable.

“I cannot understand,” Prudence would say over breakfast in the morning room, where the servants had laid out poached eggs, kippers, and the sort of heavy silver that required a footman to lift, “why you must always be gallivanting about when everything worth seeing is visible from Fifth Avenue.”

“That, dear sister,” Abigail would reply, buttering her toast, “is precisely why I go.”

Concerning a Name Spoken in Darkness, and the Trouble It Caused

The incident occurred on a Tuesday in late February, which Prudence later reflected was typical—catastrophes never had the courtesy to arrive on weekends when one had nothing else planned. She lay beside Nathaniel in their bed when she heard him murmur “Abigail” in his sleep.

It was three o’clock in the morning, that hour when New York fell silent except for the occasional clatter of a late hansom cab returning some gentleman from wherever gentlemen went when they weren’t at home, which is to say, from establishments that respectable people pretended not to know existed.

Now, a sensible woman might have dismissed this as a dream. But Prudence was not a rational woman—she was a wealthy one, which is entirely different. Rich women have the luxury of transforming

minor anxieties into major productions, and Prudence seized this opportunity with both hands, or rather, with her one good eye fixed firmly upon suspicion.

She confronted Abigail the next morning in the breakfast room, where her sister was reading the society pages of the *New York Herald* with the concentration most people reserved for Scripture.

“It’s perfectly innocent,” Abigail insisted, not looking up from an account of Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish’s latest dinner party, at which she had served champagne in hollowed-out blocks of ice shaped like swans. “Men murmur all sorts of things in their sleep. Why, I once knew a Duke who recited railway timetables.”

“Did you know him horizontally or vertically?” Prudence asked with what she imagined was devastating wit.

“A lady never tells, and a gentleman never remembers. It’s what makes society function. Rather like Mrs. Astor’s list of the Four Hundred—everyone pretends to know who’s on it, but no one can actually produce a copy.”

But the seed of doubt had been planted, and Prudence watered it daily with jealousy until it grew into a magnificent obsession. She watched Nathaniel with her one eye, but could never watch him *enough*—there were always angles, blind spots, moments when he slipped from view. For all she knew, he was conducting seventeen separate affairs in her peripheral vision alone.

She began to follow his movements with the intensity of a Pinkerton detective. On Monday, he lunched at the Union Club on Fifth Avenue and 21st Street with Ogden Goelet and Hamilton Fish Jr., discussing copper futures and the appalling state of Tammany Hall. On Tuesday, he attended a board meeting of the Metropolitan Opera at the new house on Broadway and 39th Street, where he voted to increase Mrs. Vanderbilt’s box rent, knowing it would infuriate her. On Wednesday, he took the elevated railway downtown to his offices at

44 Wall Street, where he employed twenty-three clerks who all feared him equally.

And on Thursday evenings, he dined at Delmonico's.

In Which We Descend to Delmonico's, That Temple of Appetite

To understand what transpired, one must appreciate Delmonico's, which stood at 2 South William Street, hard against Beaver Street, in the oldest and most peculiar corner of Manhattan—that tangle of narrow lanes and looming buildings where New Amsterdam still whispered beneath New York's brash American accent.

The restaurant occupied a triangular plot of land, an eight-story Gothic edifice designed by James Brown Lord in 1891, all red brick and limestone trim, with a corner tower that rose like an accusatory finger pointing at heaven—or at least at the offices of J.P. Morgan across the way. The building had three distinct facades, each facing a different street: South William, Beaver, and the nameless alley where delivery wagons came and went like conspirators.

Delmonico's was not merely a restaurant; it was an institution, the arbiter of what was acceptable and what was not. To dine at Delmonico's was to announce one's arrival in society. To be refused a table was to be erased from existence more thoroughly than any scandal could accomplish.

The restaurant had been feeding New York's elite since 1837, when the Delmonico family had arrived from Switzerland with recipes for French cuisine and an understanding that Americans would pay any price for the privilege of pretending to be European. By 1895, the restaurant had moved several times, always following money northward, but this location—the old downtown establishment—retained a special cachet. Old money dined here. New money dined at the newer location at Fifth Avenue and 44th Street, which tells you everything you need to know about Manhattan geography as moral hierarchy.

On any given evening, one might find J.P. Morgan holding court at his regular table in the northwest corner, where he could keep his back to the wall and his eye on everyone who entered. The Astors favored the southeastern alcove, where they could be seen without being approached. Ward McAllister, Mrs. Astor's social secretary and the self-appointed guardian of the Four Hundred, maintained a semi-permanent residency at a center table, from which he could observe and judge with equal facility.

The menu was entirely in French, which allowed diners to order food they couldn't pronounce and pretend they did this sort of thing all the time. Lobster Newberg was invented here in 1876, named after Ben Wenberg, until he had a falling out with the proprietor, who rearranged the letters in petty revenge. Baked Alaska had been created here in 1867 to celebrate the purchase of that frozen territory, which most New Yorkers considered a waste of money until gold was discovered. Chicken à la King was rumored to have been named after some forgotten railroad baron, though no one could remember which one—they were all interchangeable anyway.

But what made Delmonico's truly distinctive was not what happened inside its walls, but what happened just outside them.

South William Street, Beaver Street, and all the narrow lanes below Wall Street had a double life. By day, they belonged to bankers and brokers, men in dark suits carrying leather portfolios filled with stocks and bonds and the dreams of Midwestern farmers who would never see a penny of profit. By night, they belonged to someone else entirely.

The neighborhood teemed with brothels, gambling dens, and concert saloons with names like "The Slide" and "Paresis Hall"—establishments where painted women in paste jewelry waited beneath gas lamps, where men who couldn't afford Delmonico's could still afford something resembling pleasure, and where the police collected their weekly payments with the regularity of rent.

The whores worked the streets in shifts, like factory workers. The younger ones—girls, really, most of them Irish or German, fresh off the boats and already ruined by America—worked Stone Street and Mill Lane, propositioning clerks and junior bankers for a dollar or two. The older ones, their faces painted thick as plaster to hide what life had done to them, worked Beaver Street itself, sometimes standing so close to Delmonico's entrance that gentlemen departing from their ten-dollar dinners would literally have to step around them.

The contrast was deliberate. New York was a city built on such contrasts—Fifth Avenue mansions and Five Points slums, Mrs. Astor's ballroom and the Bowery flophouses, all existing in the same small island, each pretending the other didn't exist while depending absolutely on its presence.

Nathaniel dined at Delmonico's every Thursday, always at the same table in the southwestern corner, always ordering the same meal: oysters, filet mignon, asparagus with hollandaise, and a bottle of Château Margaux 1878. He went alone, which Prudence found suspicious, and he returned home smelling of cigar smoke and wine, which she found even more so.

"What do you do there?" she asked him once.

"I eat," he replied, as though this explained everything.

"For three hours?"

"French cuisine requires time, my dear. One cannot rush properly prepared béarnaise sauce. It would be uncivilized."

In Which Literature Proves Dangerous, as It So Often Does

In her distress, Prudence turned to Sarah Grand's *"The Heavenly Twins"* and *"The Beth Book"*—novels that promised to explain the New Woman and her discontent with the old arrangements. Unfortunately, being blind in her right eye, Prudence could only read the

left-hand pages, which gave her a somewhat incomplete understanding of feminism—rather like learning to waltz by studying only the gentleman's steps.

She read in her sitting room on the second floor, a space Stanford White had decorated in the Aesthetic style with Morris wallpaper and Japanese fans, where afternoon light filtered through lace curtains imported from Brussels. Her maid, Bridget O'Connor—a Kerry girl who'd been in service for three years and still crossed herself when passing Trinity Church—brought her tea at four o'clock with the precision of celestial mechanics.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?" Bridget asked, setting down the silver service.

"Yes," Prudence said, not looking up from her book. "Tell me, Bridget. Are you happy?"

Bridget blinked. In three years of service, Mrs. Suttle had never asked her a personal question. "Happy, ma'am?"

"Yes. Content. Satisfied with your lot. The New Woman books say we must all ask ourselves such questions."

"I suppose I'm as happy as any girl earning six dollars a month with every other Sunday off, ma'am," Bridget said carefully. "Which is to say, I'm grateful for the employment."

"But do you ever wish for more? Adventure? Passion? Freedom?"

Bridget considered this. "I wish for my wages on time and a warm room in winter, ma'am. That's freedom enough for girls like me."

"How terribly sensible of you," Prudence said, disappointed. "You may go."

Nevertheless, what Prudence gleaned from the left-hand pages was revolutionary: women need not be passive victims of their circumstances! They could be active architects of their own disasters!

"I shall go abroad," Prudence announced one evening at dinner in late March, when the last of winter still clung to New York like a dowager refusing to leave a party. They were eating in the formal dining room, where a chandelier imported from Venice cast prismatic light across the table. "Just like Abigail."

Nathaniel dropped his fork with a clatter against the Limoges china. Abigail dropped her pretense of disinterest.

"You loathe travel," Nathaniel said, recovering his fork and his composure simultaneously.

"You vowed never to leave New York," Abigail added, signaling the footman for more wine.

"A woman has the right to change her mind," Prudence declared. "I read it on the left side of a book."

"Which book?" Nathaniel asked suspiciously.

"Does it matter? The left side of any book contains half the wisdom of the world."

"And none of the conclusions," Abigail murmured into her wine glass.

But Prudence was not to be deterred. She had devised a plan of such cunning that it could only end in absolute disaster—which is to say, she had devised a plan. While she traveled as Abigail, Abigail would remain at Suttle House as Prudence, and they would discover once and for all where Nathaniel's true affections lay.

"If someone in this house is to lead a double life," Prudence declared, "it should be me!"

"Darling," Abigail said gently, "we're identical twins who live in the same house with the same man. We've *been* leading double lives. You're simply making it official."

They worked out the details over the following week. Prudence would take Abigail's trunks and Abigail's letters of introduction. She would sail on the Cunard Line's *Lucania*, departing from Pier 40 on April 15th, bound for Liverpool. From there, she would proceed to London, Paris, Venice, Constantinople—all the places Abigail had been, following the same itinerary, staying at the same hotels.

"You must stay at Brown's in London," Abigail instructed. "The Ritz in Paris—new, rather vulgar, but comfortable. The *Danieli* in Venice. And in Constantinople, the Pera Palace. They're expecting Miss Suttle, so you needn't worry about awkward questions."

"What if someone recognizes me as Prudence?"

"Impossible. You've never traveled. No one abroad knows you exist. As far as European society is concerned, there is only one Suttle sister, and she is charmingly unmarried and thoroughly modern."

Nathaniel watched these preparations with the detachment of a man observing his wife pack for someone else's funeral. He neither encouraged nor discouraged the scheme, which Prudence found more suspicious than outright opposition would have been.

On the morning of her departure, he kissed her goodbye on the cheek in the entrance hall, where their bags were already loaded into the brougham.

"Safe travels, my dear," he said.

"Aren't you going to ask me not to go?" Prudence asked, disappointed.

"Would it change your mind?"

"No."

"Then why waste the breath? Besides," he added, with what might have been the ghost of a smile, "I'm sure Abigail will keep me company in your absence."

A European Education, Or, The Consolations of Sicilians

Prudence—or rather, “Abigail”—embarked for Europe with three steamer trunks, a lady’s maid borrowed from her mother in Philadelphia (her own Bridget couldn’t be spared), and a heart full of righteous purpose. The *Lucania* was the fastest ship on the Atlantic, capable of making the crossing in five and a half days, though Prudence rather wished it would take longer. The sea air, the endless horizon, the suspension between one life and another—it was the closest she’d come to freedom since her wedding day.

She discovered that first-class passengers on Cunard liners lived much as they did in New York, only more compressed. There were the same people—or people indistinguishable from them—wearing the same clothes, having the same conversations. Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt was aboard, traveling to Paris for the Season. George Vanderbilt, her bachelor brother-in-law, was returning to inspect progress on his absurd *château* in the North Carolina mountains. Even Ward McAllister was there, going to London to secure invitations for various American heiresses hoping to marry impoverished English aristocrats.

“Miss Suttle!” McAllister exclaimed when he encountered her on the promenade deck on the second day out. “How delightful! I’d heard you were adventuring in Egypt.”

“I was,” Prudence said, remembering just in time that she was supposed to be Abigail. “Now I’m adventuring in other directions.”

“And your sister? How is dear Prudence?”

“Married,” Prudence said dryly. “Which is its own form of adventure, I suppose.”

McAllister laughed, though she could see him filing away the comment for later use. Everything was material for gossip when you were Ward McAllister.

In London, she stayed at Brown's Hotel on Albemarle Street in Mayfair, where the staff called her Miss Suttle and brought her breakfast tea with the precision of a military campaign. She visited the British Museum, saw "*An Ideal Husband*" at the Haymarket Theatre (and thought Wilde was rather too pleased with his own cleverness), and attended a reception at the American Embassy, where she met other traveling Americans who all seemed to be fleeing something—husbands, debts, or merely the prospect of another New York winter.

Paris was much the same, only in French. She stayed at the Ritz, which had opened just two years earlier and was already filled with people trying to prove they'd been there first. She visited the Louvre, walked in the Tuileries, and attended the opera, where she understood neither the Italian nor the plot, but applauded in the right places because everyone else did.

By the time she reached Constantinople in late June, she was exhausted by the performance of being Abigail. It was more complicated than she'd imagined, this business of being someone else. Abigail had friends everywhere—or at least people who claimed to be friends—and they all expected her to remember conversations she'd never had about people she'd never met.

From Constantinople, she took a steamer down the coast to Smyrna, and from there a railway carriage to Selçuk, that dusty town hard against the ruins of ancient Ephesus. She went because Abigail's letters had mentioned it, but also because she wanted to be somewhere that no one expected Miss Suttle to be—somewhere she could be neither Prudence nor Abigail, but simply anonymous.

In Selçuk, she found exactly what she was looking for: obscurity, heat, and Eduardo.

The theater was barely a theater at all—a converted warehouse with wooden benches and a curtain that stuck halfway through every

scene change. The troupe was performing "*The Comedy of Errors*" in Italian, which meant Prudence understood approximately one word in five, but the physical comedy needed no translation.

Eduardo played Antipholus of Syracuse with a swagger that suggested he'd been practicing in mirrors. He was perhaps thirty-five, with the kind of weathered handsomeness that came from spending too much time in bad theaters in worse towns. His costume was threadbare, his accent thick, but when he moved across the stage, Prudence couldn't look away.

After the performance, he found her standing outside the theater in the warm evening air, where vendors were selling roasted nuts and children were playing in the dust.

"You are American," he said in heavily accented English.

"How did you know?"

"Your shoes. Americans always wear the newest shoes. Europeans wear the oldest ones we can still walk in."

She laughed, which she hadn't done in months. "I'm Abigail Suttle."

"Eduardo Corsini. From Palermo. You like the play?"

"I liked you in it."

"Ah." He smiled, and his face transformed from handsome to dangerous. "Then you have very good taste. Or very bad. I can never tell which."

They conducted their affair over three nights in a small room above a tavern that smelled of olive oil and tobacco. Eduardo made love with the same theatrical intensity he brought to Shakespeare, all grand gestures and passionate declarations, which Prudence found simultaneously absurd and intoxicating.

"I am an actor," he explained on the third morning as he dressed to leave, the sunlight through the shutters striping his back with shadow. "I excel at pretending to be other people. But I am dreadful at being myself. It's why I never do it."

"How convenient for you," Prudence said from the bed, "to have a profession that excuses your character."

"How convenient for you," Eduardo replied, buttoning his shirt, "to have a sister who excuses yours. You think I don't know you are not Abigail? Abigail Suttle was here two years ago. She looked exactly like you. So either you are twins, or you are a ghost. Either way, I am not asking questions."

"You knew?"

"A woman who travels alone, who gives a false name, who takes a lover she will never see again—she is running from something. I am running from many things. We have this in common."

He kissed her goodbye and left her with a railway schedule and a feeling she couldn't quite name—something between regret and relief.

The Return, Or, Everyone Has Changed Except the Furniture

When Prudence returned to Suttle House on a cold October morning, stepping down from the brougham onto the familiar sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, she found that six months abroad had transformed her in ways she hadn't anticipated.

Her hair, which had been dark brown, was now streaked with silver. Her skin, which had been smooth, showed lines around her eyes and mouth that hadn't been there in April. She looked, she realized with horror, like a woman approaching forty rather than leaving twenty-eight.

Abigail met her in the entrance hall, where Stanford White's design featured a grand staircase that curved upward like a question mark. Her sister looked, impossibly, younger—her skin radiant, her posture erect, her eyes bright with something that might have been happiness or might have been triumph.

"You look dreadful," Abigail said with sisterly candor, kissing her on both cheeks in the European fashion.

"You look suspicious," Prudence replied, removing her gloves and handing them to Bridget, who took them without meeting her eyes.

They stood in the entrance hall, mirror images that no longer matched, and Prudence felt time shift beneath her feet like a ship changing course.

"We should talk," Abigail said. "In private."

They went to the morning room on the second floor, where the servants had already laid out tea—proper New York tea with sandwiches and cakes, not the heavy European breakfasts Prudence had grown accustomed to. The October light through the windows was thin and pale, nothing like the fierce Mediterranean sun that had weathered her face.

Abigail poured with the precision of someone who'd been mistress of the house for six months, which of course she had been.

"Your husband ravaged me nightly," Abigail announced with the pride of someone describing a successful charity fundraiser.

Prudence felt the world tilt. "He ravaged you as *me*!"

"Initially, yes. But on the third night—let me see, that would have been April 18th, a Thursday—we attended the opening of *'The Importance of Being Earnest'* at the Empire Theatre on Broadway. Oscar Wilde's new play, terribly clever. The central premise involves a man who invents a fictional brother so he can escape his responsi-

bilities in the country and pursue pleasure in the city. Rather resonant, don't you think?"

"Get to the point, Abigail."

"The point is, after the theater, over late supper at—where do you think?—Delmonico's, naturally, the downtown location, our usual table, I suggested to Nathaniel that we play a little game. I asked him to pretend that Prudence was pretending to be Abigail. He found the idea tremendously arousing."

"You despicable one-eyed strumpet!"

"I prefer 'monocular adventuress,' but yes, essentially. Though I must say, I played the part of Prudence playing Abigail with far more conviction than you ever played Prudence playing Prudence. We developed quite an elaborate scenario. He would come home from the Union Club, and I would greet him as you greeting him as me. The levels of deception were dizzying. Rather like one of those Russian nesting dolls, only with adultery."

Prudence, desperate to regain the moral high ground, made her counter-thrust: "I had an affair! With a Sicilian! Named Eduardo Corsini! From Palermo! He was tremendously passionate about centuries of Mediterranean oppression, which he addressed through vigorous intimacy!"

"You lecherous two-faced trollop!"

"I did all my lecherousness as *Abigail*! As far as Eduardo Corsini is concerned, Abigail Suttle is a woman of loose morals and insatiable appetites! My conscience remains spotless!"

"Then why," Abigail asked with lethal sweetness, reaching for a cucumber sandwich, "have you aged twenty years? Sin always extracts its price, dear sister. Look at me—I'm practically youthful. Six months of guilt-free pleasure has done wonders for my complex-

ion. But you? Before long, you'll pass for my mother rather than my twin."

In her fury, Prudence struck Abigail across the face with enough force to knock the teacup from her hand. It shattered on Stanford White's parquet floor, porcelain fragments scattering like accusations.

Abigail, never one to turn the other cheek when the first one was still smarting, struck back. The slap echoed through the morning room, past the Morris wallpaper and the Japanese fans, past the lace curtains from Brussels.

They stood there, mirror images with identical wounds beneath their seeing eyes, and for the first time in their lives, they were perfectly, miserably symmetrical.

"There's something else," Abigail said, her voice dropping to a whisper that somehow carried more menace than her shouts. "Something I should have told you years ago."

The Delmonico's Revelation, Or, Architecture as Destiny

"I impersonated you," Abigail said, touching her reddening cheek with careful fingers, "several times during your courtship with Nathaniel."

The words hung in the air like an expensive chandelier that might, at any moment, come crashing down.

"You... what?"

"Oh, don't look so scandalized. It was 1892, three years ago now. You were busy being yourself, which is terribly time-consuming, so I occasionally filled in. Nathaniel never noticed. I'm not sure he ever noticed *you*, really. We're interchangeable, dear sister. That's rather the point of being twins."

Prudence sat down heavily in one of the Aesthetic movement chairs that Stanford White had selected. “You’re lying.”

“I’m confessing, which is the opposite of lying, though I admit the truth can sometimes sound implausible. Do you remember when Nathaniel proposed meeting him at Delmonico’s? The downtown location, not the new one uptown?”

“Of course. April 14th, 1892. That’s where he declared his intentions. We had oysters and champagne.”

“Yes, well. I declared his intentions back. You had one of your headaches that evening—you always had headaches on important evenings. Mother’s Philadelphia doctor had prescribed you laudanum, which you took liberally. You were unconscious by six o’clock. So I went in your place.”

Prudence felt the room spinning. “But Nathaniel proposed to me the next day. In the conservatory at Suttle House. I remember his exact words.”

“Yes, he proposed to you. But he fell in love with me. Or rather, he fell in love with the woman he thought was you, who was actually me. The metaphysics are a bit tangled, I admit.”

Abigail stood and walked to the window, looking down at Fifth Avenue, where carriages were passing and a street vendor was selling roasted chestnuts despite the mild weather.

“We sat at his usual table,” she continued, “in the southwestern corner. The one with a view of both entrances. It was a Thursday—it’s always Thursday with Nathaniel, you may have noticed. He ordered for both of us, which I found both presumptuous and charming. Bluepoint oysters to start, followed by filet mignon with béarnaise sauce. The Château Margaux 1878. He always orders the ’78.”

“I don’t want the menu. I want the truth.”

"I'm giving you both, dear sister. The truth is in the details."

Abigail turned from the window. "We talked for three hours. About everything—his business, his travels, his contempt for old Cornelius Vanderbilt's ostentatious vulgarity, his respect for J.P. Morgan's ruthless efficiency. He told me about growing up poor in Ohio, which I'd never heard before because you'd never bothered to ask. He made his first fortune in Cleveland selling railway supplies, lost it in the Panic of '73, made another in copper mining in Montana, lost that in a bad speculation, made a third in New York in stocks. He'd been married before, briefly, to a woman who died of consumption in 1885. He'd been lonely for seven years."

"He never told me any of this," Prudence whispered.

"No, because you never went to Delmonico's with him. I did."

"But why? Why would you—"

"Because I wanted to know what it felt like. To be you. To be the one who got proposed to, who got chosen, who got the house on Fifth Avenue and the visiting cards and the box at the Metropolitan Opera. I wanted to know if it would feel different from being me, the spinster sister, the adventuress, the one who travels alone and raises eyebrows."

"And did it? Feel different?"

Abigail smiled, and it was not a pleasant expression. "Yes. It felt like betrayal. Which is to say, it felt delicious."

She sat back down, reaching for a fresh teacup and pouring with steady hands.

"Here's what you need to understand about Delmonico's, Prudence. It's not just a restaurant. It's a temple to a very specific American religion—the worship of appetite disguised as civilization. Those damask tablecloths, French menus, and waiters with accents—it's

all a performance. We're all performing. The Astors performing old money, the Vanderbilts performing new money that wants to be old, Ward McAllister performing the role of social arbiter. And Nathaniel was performing the role of a successful businessman courting a respectable Philadelphia lady."

"You're saying our entire marriage is based on a performance?"

"I'm saying all marriages are based on performance, darling. The only question is whether the actors know they're acting."

Abigail set down her teacup. "But here's the truly interesting part. The building itself. Have you ever really looked at it? Two South William Street, corner of Beaver. That triangular plot of land, that Gothic edifice with its three distinct sides. James Brown Lord designed it in 1891, just a year before we had our fateful dinner there. Three sides, three people. The symbolism is almost embarrassingly obvious."

"You cannot possibly be suggesting—"

"That we were doomed by architecture? Perhaps. Or perhaps we simply recognized ourselves in it. That building stands at the corner of where old money meets new money meets no money at all. South William Street was once the carriage trade. Beaver Street was—still is—where the banks are. And just around the corner, on Stone Street and Mill Lane, that's where the whores work."

Prudence stood up abruptly. "I don't need a lecture on Lower Manhattan geography."

Nathaniel's Confession, Or, Everyone Is Guilty of Everything

Unable to bear the weight of deception any longer, Prudence resolved to confess everything to Nathaniel. But as she opened her mouth to speak, he raised a hand.

"Allow me," he said. "I know everything."

"You... know?"

"My dear Prudence—and you *are* Prudence at the moment, aren't you? One can never be entirely certain. In any case, I've always known. Did you think me blind? Though I suppose one-eyed women shouldn't throw stones."

"But—"

"Abigail told me of your scheme the moment you left for Europe. We agreed it was tremendously amusing. While you were in Constantinople conducting your 'secret' affair with a Sicilian actor—really, darling, could you have been more predictable?—I was here conducting a quite open affair with your sister pretending to be you. It was rather like a French farce, except with better furniture."

Prudence felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath her feet, which was appropriate, as she had built her entire world on assumptions that had just been revealed as quicksand.

"Then you don't love me at all?"

"On the contrary," Nathaniel said, and his voice held something that might have been genuine feeling, had he been capable of such a thing. "I love you exactly as much as I love Abigail, which is to say, I love the idea of both of you, separately and together, which amounts to loving one complete woman who has the consideration to exist in two separate locations at the same time. It's tremendously convenient."

"That's not love," Prudence whispered.

"No," Nathaniel agreed. "It's marriage. Love is what you had with Eduardo, I suspect—brief, passionate, and in no danger of enduring. Marriage is the long comedy we perform for society's benefit. I've simply had the good fortune to cast two leading ladies."

Abigail entered the room, drawn by the sound of her sister's breaking heart like a connoisseur drawn to the sound of fine china shattering.

"Have you told her?" she asked Nathaniel.

"Told me what?" Prudence demanded.

"About Delmonico's," Abigail said. "About the gargoyle curse."

"There's no such thing as curses," Nathaniel said wearily. "There's only architecture and coincidence and people who insist on finding meaning in the arrangement of stone and desire."

"The building is triangular," Abigail insisted. "Three sides, three people. We are bound by geometry, Prudence. We have been from the beginning. You, me, and Nathaniel—we are Delmonico's made flesh, condemned to revolve around each other in perpetuity, each of us seeing only what our limited perspective allows."

"That," Prudence said, "is the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

"Yes," Abigail agreed. "Isn't it wonderful?"

The Transformation, Or How Blindness Became Vision

In the months that followed, something remarkable occurred, though whether it was a miracle or a metaphor even the narrator cannot say with certainty.

Prudence's left eye, her one source of vision, began to fail. Within a year, she had gone completely blind. She moved to a separate bedroom in Suttle House, where she lived in darkness and depended entirely on Abigail for care.

And Abigail's right eye—her blind eye—began to see. Slowly at first, then with increasing clarity, until she could perceive the world in its full depth and dimension. With sight came youth; her skin grew

radiant, her step light. She became, in every way, the woman Prudence had once been.

“Can you see me?” Prudence would ask from her darkness.

“Yes,” Abigail would reply. “I can see everything now.”

“What do I look like?”

“Old,” Abigail said, because honesty was the only kindness she had ever learned to give. “But content, I think. Are you content?”

Prudence considered this. She had lost her sight, her youth, her husband, and her illusions—which is to say, she had lost everything except her sister.

“Yes,” she said finally. “I believe I am.”

Nathaniel, freed from the burden of choosing between them, grew neither older nor younger but simply more himself—which is to say, comfortably unchanged. He and Abigail lived as husband and wife in all but name, while Prudence resided in her room like a conscience made flesh, a reminder of promises broken and somehow, impossibly, kept.

Epilogue: In Which Nothing Is Resolved, But Everything Is Concluded

Years passed, as they have a tiresome habit of doing. Prudence died peacefully in her sleep, having forgiven everyone, including herself—a luxury she could afford now that she could no longer see the damage forgiveness failed to repair.

At her funeral, Nathaniel wept, and Abigail did not, which surprised no one who knew them.

They never married, Nathaniel and Abigail. Marriage, they agreed, would spoil the arrangement. Instead, they lived happily ever after

in the manner of people who have learned to find happiness in the ruins of their better intentions.

The Delmonico's Building still stands at the corner of Beaver and South Williams Street, its three sides arranged in a triangle that casts three different shadows, depending on the hour of day. The gargoyles still leer from its Gothic facade, their stone faces twisted in expressions that might be laughter or might be warning.

But to whom they're laughing, and of what they're warning, remains—like so many things in this tale—a matter of which eye you choose to see it with.

Finis

THE SIX INCH SKYSCRAPER

Ajay was a collector of miniature trinkets. Every Saturday, he wandered the street fairs along the Upper West Side, searching for something unusual. One morning, something caught his eye. Tucked between a signed Derek Jeter baseball and a crate of sun-faded LPs was an unmarked velvet pouch, musty with the scent of dust. Inside it rested an impossibly detailed six-inch skyscraper.

It resembled the Empire State Building, but its spire was narrower, its setbacks steeper, its symmetry slightly off. Its doors bore logos that Ajay didn't recognize. The windows, though no bigger than sesame seeds, caught the light in a way that made Ajay squint—because, if he stared long enough, he could almost see movement inside.

Ajay was twelve, a straight-A student who read three grade levels ahead but struggled to speak up in class.

He lived in a world of busy parents and preteen isolation.

His mother, Professor Sharma, spoke in clipped English about post-colonial theory and American hegemony, her brow knitting in worry

over a country that preached equality but whispered prejudice. She published papers on displacement while barely noticing her son's quiet dislocation.

His father, a scholar of foreign policy, tapped at his laptop in the living room, groaning about Senate debates and the half-truths politicians peddled. They—two brilliant souls from Mumbai, India, who had come to Columbia University for its prestige—had little time for bedtime stories or interpreting their son's silent glances. At faculty dinners, they praised Ajay's intelligence to colleagues, but at home, they assumed his silence meant contentment.

So Ajay had turned, as he always did, to his miniature world: tin soldiers plucked from flea markets, plastic dancers from birthday cake toppers, and matchstick replicas of the Brooklyn Bridge. In his bedroom, these little souls listened to what his parents never heard.

That Saturday morning, Ajay brought home the tiny high-rise he'd purchased for seven dollars and set it on his desk, where, beneath the lamp's glow, its windows shimmered alive—soft oranges and faint blues, an eternal twilight dancing inside walls no bigger than his thumbnail.

This is impossible, he told himself, as the rational part of his mind—the part that earned him gold stars and teacher praise—rebelled against what he saw. Buildings didn't have lights. Toys didn't breathe. But his eyes betrayed his logic.

He told his parents that night, approaching them in the kitchen where they debated immigration policy over reheated takeout.

“There are lights in my building,” he said.

His mother glanced up from her laptop. “What building, beta?”

“The one I bought today. I think there are people inside.”

His father looked up from his tablet and smiled. “People? What kind of people?”

“Little people. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” his father repeated, amused. “Sometimes little people have big problems—especially if they’re trying to run a democracy.”

Ajay shrugged. “I guess.”

“Speaking in the abstract, of course,” his father leaned back and smiled. “You’re not running a refugee camp, are you?”

“No.”

“Good,” his father said, already turning back to his screen. “Give the little people what they want.”

“They’re not real, Amit,” his mother said with a smile.

His father glanced at Ajay. “I didn’t say they were. Are they real, Ajay?”

Ajay hesitated. “No. Maybe not.”

“Well then, problem solved,” his father said lightly.

And just like that, they returned to their screens, typing through the next article, the next panel discussion about belonging and displacement.

That night, in the adjoining rooms, they argued quietly:

“Look at how free this country pretends to be,” his mother hissed. “It’s hell, Amit—every other day another policy, another deportation.”

“It’s the same in some parts of India now,” his father replied. “But here—never in my wildest dreams did I imagine academics would have to choose their words so carefully.”

Ajay pressed himself against the wall, the tension making the air thrum. Outside his window, New York sprawled in all directions—millions of lights, millions of people, all of them strangers. He felt suspended between his parents' world of theories and a reality that seemed to shift with each blink.

He stepped back, returning to his desk where the skyscraper now stood nearly a foot tall. It had grown in his absence.

No, he thought. Things don't grow, not like this.

But inside the highest windows, a faint silhouette had appeared: a person, or something that looked like one, curled against the glass, their head tilted back in a silent scream. At the base, he heard it: a sound like "Eeeek," so small and broken it might have been chalk on a blackboard. He felt his chest twist.

By the next morning, the building stood nearly eighteen inches tall. The figure in the window was easier to see now—a woman, or something like one, holding her arms tightly across her chest, as if cold or afraid.

At breakfast, his parents hurried through their routines, flipping through notes and sipping coffee as they discussed their morning lectures. Ajay tried again.

"My building is getting bigger," he said.

His mother paused, cup halfway to her lips. "What did you say?"

"The skyscraper. It's growing."

She studied him then, really looked, for the first time in weeks. "Are you feeling alright? You look pale."

"I'm fine. But the building—"

"We need to talk about moving," his father interrupted gently,

stacking his notes. "There's an apartment closer to campus. It'll mean a shorter commute for both of us."

Ajay nodded.

He began to question whether reality was as fixed as his parents claimed. Their world—lectures, papers, policy—depended on proof. But Ajay was starting to believe in things that couldn't be cited.

The skyscraper continued to grow. Two feet. Then three. He stopped going outside. Meals went untouched. His schoolbooks sat unopened. He watched the building more than he watched anything else.

Its walls filled with life: kitchens with ticking clocks, stairwells lit by flickering bulbs, elevators that stalled halfway between floors. On the twenty-second floor, a woman walked back and forth, as if waiting for someone—or something—to set her free.

The city outside seemed to mock him. From his window, he could see the real skyscrapers—solid, predictable, filled with people who belonged somewhere. But his building was different. It was alive, and it was his.

"You must be the new owner?" a voice came from within.

Ajay jumped back. *A little man! I'm losing my mind*, he thought.

A small, rotund man, around 50 years old, appeared on the first floor. "I'm the superintendent. Name's Nunzio. You the new owner?"

"I-I think I'm imagining you," Ajay stammered.

"Kid, you bought the building. I work here. What's to imagine? Though I gotta say, you're young for a property owner. You one of those crypto-millionaires?"

"I'm twelve."

"Figures. Well, twelve or not, we got problems. Squatters on the fourteenth floor. You're going to have to obtain a court order and forcibly remove them."

"Oh, and the boiler's shot—no heat half the time. And there's a woman in 22C who wants to throw herself out the window every Saturday night. Did they tell you this when you bought the building?"

"No one told me anything. I bought it for seven dollars."

"Seven million? You got a good deal. Listen, I don't care if you're having some kind of breakdown, but I got a building to keep up here. So let's communicate. What'd you say your name was again?"

"Ajay."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Ajay," Nunzio said, tipping his cap.

Ajay stood frozen. His hands tingled as if he'd touched something electric. He considered running to tell his parents about the little man named Nunzio, about the boiler, about the woman in 22C—but stopped himself. They wouldn't understand.

He turned back to the building. The lights on the twenty-second floor pulsed faintly. The woman Nunzio mentioned. The one that he said threatened to throw herself out of the window. She had to be the one he'd seen earlier—the woman with the sad eyes and the curled posture. He scanned the windows, searching for her.

But something else caught his attention.

On the fourteenth floor, a man stood by a broken window, wild-eyed, coat threadbare. He leaned out, waving his arms at Ajay.

"Hey, you can't evict us! We got squatter's rights. Just because we can't afford to pay rent don't mean we're not human beings!"

Ajay blinked. "I—I wasn't going to evict anyone."

The man pointed an accusatory finger. “Nunzio said you were the new owner. That true?”

“Yes,” Ajay said cautiously, then added, trying to sound firm, “But ownership doesn’t override human dignity. I mean, not in a functioning democracy.”

The man squinted. “You a politician?”

“No. I’m a kid. But my family is from Mumbai. Most of my cousins still live in slums.”

The man nodded slowly. “So you’re one of us, then.”

Ajay didn’t answer. He felt something tighten in his chest—not fear exactly, but a kind of awareness. A shrinking and expanding, all at once.

Nunzio reappeared in the lobby, tipping his cap again. “See what I mean? Fourteenth floor’s a mess. But they’ve got a point, too. This place has history. You’re walking a fine line. You let the squatters stay, you’ll have a rent mutiny on your hands. You kick them out, you’ll be painted as heartless. You bought yourself a real problem when you bought this building, kid.”

Ajay stepped closer. The high-rise was now shoulder height. He could see into the windows with ease—arguments, laughter, desperation—all flickering in miniature, repeating in rooms no bigger than matchboxes.

He crouched, eyes level with the fourteenth floor. The man had disappeared back inside.

Ajay whispered, “What am I supposed to do with all of you?”

The building didn’t answer.

The next morning, Ajay sat at the breakfast table, staring into a bowl of cereal gone soft. His father scrolled through headlines on his

tablet, one hand nursing a mug of black coffee. His mother moved between the toaster and her inbox, already dressed for her first seminar.

Ajay cleared his throat.

“I might have to evict some tenants,” he said.

His father didn’t look up. “Tenants?”

“In my building.”

Now his father glanced over the rim of his glasses. “Ah, the imaginary high-rise again.”

Ajay didn’t answer.

“Well,” his father said, setting down his mug, “evictions are never a clean solution. You want to clear space, you get a mess. Legally, morally. Best case, you write a letter. Worst case, you get sued.”

“Dad, it’s complicated. Some of them don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“They never do,” his father said, not unkindly. “But you also can’t have a building overrun with squatters. Show them who’s boss. You let them stay, and next thing you know, everyone stops paying rent.”

His mother chimed in from behind her screen. “This is what happens when you privatize housing without social policy. Even in imagination.”

“I didn’t privatize anything,” Ajay muttered. “I bought it for seven dollars.”

His father raised an eyebrow. “Seven dollars? That’s quite the acquisition. Still, be firm, Ajay. Give the appearance of goodwill and decency, but don’t ever let them get the upper hand. That said, you could always put the bloody building back on the market.”

Ajay gave a tight smile. He could feel them drifting already, back into their work, their routines, their analysis.

“Well, good luck, beta,” his mother added, glancing at her watch. “Don’t let the rent control laws scare you either.”

“Thanks,” Ajay said quietly.

They returned to their screens. The subject was closed.

Ajay sat a while longer, letting the cereal turn to paste. Then he got up, walked back to his room, and closed the door behind him.

The building had grown to six feet in height. Ajay gasped at the sight of it. The windows flickered dimly in the soft morning light, the air in the room unusually still, as though holding its breath.

And then he saw her.

The woman in 22C.

She stood on a narrow ledge outside a window on the twenty-second floor. Her toes curled over the edge, her arms crossed against the wind, which Ajay couldn't feel but somehow knew was cold. She was barefoot. Her hair clung to her face. She looked smaller now, a collapsed version of the figure he'd once glimpsed pacing behind glass.

Ajay pressed his face close to the building.

“Hey, you!” he said, his voice cracking.

She didn't move.

“I see you!”

Her head turned slowly. Her eyes were empty.

“You shouldn't be able to,” she said.

“What are you doing?!”

The woman in 22C looked back out over the city. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Ajay swallowed hard. His heart was thudding against his ribs. “Please. Don’t jump.”

“What are you? And why are you talking to me? You don’t know anything about me! I’m going to do what I believe I have to do! I’m finished with this city! And I don’t want to live anymore!”

Ajay hesitated. He wanted to answer as his parents would have—calm, logical, maybe with a reference to statistics on suicide rates. But something inside him wouldn’t allow it.

“I know what it’s like to feel alone,” he said. “Like there’s no place that fits, even in your own home.”

The woman in 22C didn’t speak.

Ajay continued, words pouring out now. “I know what it’s like to watch people talk about justice and belonging and never once ask you how your day was. I know how quiet can feel like a punishment. I know what it’s like to disappear in plain sight.”

She looked at him again. Her lip trembled.

“I came here when I was nineteen,” she said softly. “I had dreams. I was going to dance at Lincoln Center. I told everyone back home in Jaipur that I’d be on stage by twenty-three. That was eight years ago. Now I clean apartments and wait tables and sleep on couches I don’t own.”

“What is your name?” Ajay said.

“Mina.”

“I’m Ajay. You said you were from Jaipur. I’m from India too. Mumbai!”

“I’m thirty-one, Ajay,” Mina whispered. “Too old for ballet. Too scared to go home to Jaipur. I don’t want to be a failure.”

Ajay felt tears rising, uninvited. “You’re not.”

“How would you know?”

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But I know you’re still here. That has to mean something.”

Ajay’s fingers were hovering near the window. “You’re very pretty, Mina,” he said, the words awkward, but earnest. “I mean, not just how you look. But you gave it everything you had for eight years.”

She said nothing. She looked down.

Ajay pressed on. “In Mumbai, where my parents are from, there’s this story my grandmother used to tell about a woman who wandered through a forest looking for God to save her. She kept walking, even after losing her shoes and her voice giving out. But in the end, God didn’t save her. But all was not lost! She found a river, and the river saved her.”

“How so?”

“Because she saw herself in it. She realized she was never looking for God. She was looking for a reflection that would speak back.”

Mina blinked. Her shoulders relaxed slightly.

“You don’t need to jump,” Ajay said. “Maybe I’m the reflection meant to speak back to you!”

Her foot inched backward, off the ledge. And all of a sudden, she let out a cry, “No, no, no, you don’t understand.”

Ajay held his breath.

Mina leaped from the ledge of the building.

Ajay's hand shot forward, not out of thought, but instinct. His palm hovered beneath her as she fell, in a fraction of a second that stretched impossibly wide.

She was in the air, suspended.

Not falling.

Not flying.

Caught.

She landed in his open palm. Her eyes were wide, her arms clenched around herself. Her knees buckled as if she had truly fallen from twenty-two stories, and yet, she was safe. In his hand. Real.

Ajay couldn't move. He stared at her, stunned by her weightlessness, by the heat she gave off like a tiny flame, by the shimmer of life in her eyes. His room had fallen silent. Even the usual hum of the city outside seemed to bow to this impossible moment.

She looked up at him, barely whispering, "You caught me."

He nodded. Tears were blurring his vision now. "You jumped."

"I didn't think anyone would be there to stop me."

Ajay swallowed. "Neither did I."

They stayed like that for what felt like forever and no time at all. Somewhere in the folds of that silence, something shifted in Ajay. Not what his parents measured in grades or good behavior, but something more profound: the knowledge that every person carries a story you can't see unless you listen hard enough.

He lowered his hand gently, placing Mina back by the twenty-second-floor window. She stood, still shaken, but steadier now. She looked at him one last time, nodded once, then disappeared.

The skyscraper pulsed with light, then dimmed.

The next morning, Ajay woke to another noticeable change in the size of his skyscraper, but he was distracted by the sound of his parents' voices coming from the kitchen. Ajay's mother sat at the end of the dining table, cross-legged, scrolling through *The Times* on her tablet. His father, still in his house slippers, sipped tea and scanned a news alert on his phone.

"Agit," his mother called out. "A young Indian woman jumped from a building in Midtown last night. Survived the fall."

His father glanced up. "What a coincidence. I'm just reading that now. My God!"

"From Jaipur. Attempted suicide."

"Oh, how sad! Came to New York for ballet, the report said. Miraculously, she survived."

"Yes. She landed on scaffolding—bruised ribs, broken leg, but alive."

At that moment, Ajay entered the room and quietly took his seat at the table. No one noticed at first. He poured cereal into a chipped bowl and added milk that smelled faintly of the fridge. He listened.

Ajay's father shook his head. "So many come with that dream: writers, poets, artists, dancers. Their life is brutal. No safety net."

Ajay looked up. "Do you think it's real?"

His parents glanced at him.

"The story," he said. "About the ballerina. How do you know it's real?"

His mother blinked. "Because it's in the news, beta. There's a photograph."

"Sometimes they get things wrong," his father said. "But yes, it's real enough."

Ajay looked down into his cereal. "It just doesn't feel like it."

"You mean because it's sad?" his mother asked.

Ajay didn't answer.

His father leaned back. "She came from India, Ajay. Like us. That part of it is real, too."

"We're different," his mother added. "She came with her body. We came with our minds."

"Do you think God saved her?" Ajay suddenly asked.

"God? Your grandmother would say so," his mother said, taking a bite of toast. "God or no God, anyone who attempts suicide is irrational in their mind."

"Yes, well, ballerinas are light as a feather," his father said. "Maybe that's what saved her."

The news moved on. His mother tapped at her tablet. His father stirred sugar into his tea.

After a quiet moment, his father looked over the rim of his mug. "So," he said, "how are things going with your skyscraper? Settled the squatters' issue?"

Ajay swallowed a spoonful of cereal. "The building shrunk."

"Shrank," his mother corrected gently. "Proper English, beta."

"Shrank," he repeated. "Back to six inches. Just like when I bought it."

His father chuckled. "Guess your zoning board finally passed those regulations."

"Or maybe your tenants unionized," his mother said, smiling faintly.

Ajay smiled too, but distantly. He looked out the window. The skyline glinted in the sun. It was quiet again.

“Well,” his father said, “your birthday’s right around the corner, Ajay. Isn’t it? Twelve going on thirteen. You’ll be a young man. Your mother and I are very proud of you.”

“You’ll have to trade in your six-inch skyscraper for a job application,” his mother added, then smiled. “Or better yet, an entrance essay.”

His father sipped his tea, then added, more to himself, “Yes, something about your skyscraper. No matter how small or tall, it’s the shadow it casts. That’s not the first thing people notice about a skyscraper. The shadow it casts.”

Ajay looked down at his hands. Then at his parents.

“Maybe it’s because as the sun moves, so does the shadow,” he said.

“Yes, I think you’re on to something, Ajay.”

CITY OF ABSURDITIES

SATIRE AND SURREALISM

“At any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.”

— **Albert Camus**

AFTER EVERYTHING I'VE DONE FOR YOU

"We just landed our dream apartment," Darcy announced, practically vibrating with joy, to Tristan and Juan—two strangers she and Cole had befriended ten minutes into their first wide-eyed stroll through Abingdon Square.

"One-bedroom. On Bank Street, no less."

Cole, her Connecticut-bred husband, nodded, his face molded into a stiff rictus.

"Get out!" Juan, leashed to his Pekingese, cried. "A one-bedroom on a tree-lined street? That's like finding a unicorn that already knows how to use a litter box."

"Oh, you're funny, Juan!" Darcy bounced.

"On a good day. Most of the time, I'm just manic-y."

"Who's your agent?" Tristan demanded.

"His name is Omar," Darcy said.

"He's a little eccentric, but OH MY GOD—he is just ... THE BEST! I mean, he went to war for us."

"Please tell me you have his card. I will pay in blood," Tristan declared. "I have paid in blood before. Not for housing, but still."

"We're dying to move back to the West Village," Juan added, nearly dropping the Pekingese's leash. "Brooklyn is just...so Brooklyn now. Everyone there has a kombucha brewery in their bathtub. It's exhausting."

"We are so fucking over it!" deadpanned Tristan.

"Darcy, excuse my prying, but I must know what you do for a living?" Juan asked.

"Helping people live their best selves—to be quite honest," Darcy said brightly, her voice two octaves too high, the trauma sublimating into some manic presentation energy. "I like to call myself a Positive Lifestyle Architect."

"God, that is so inspiring," Tristan breathed, clutching his Hermes scarf. "You got it goin' on, girl. You're young, blonde, with a sexy husband, and here you are—ready to set the world on fire!"

"I know, it's just so amazing!"

"You know what they say—'when the universe opens up for you.'"

Meanwhile, the furious Pekingese spun in furious little circles like a demonic wind-up toy.

"Shush, quiet, AOC! Pappy's talking!" Juan scolded, clicking his tongue.

Cole blinked. "Wait. Your puppy's name is AOC?"

Juan straightened, brushing imaginary lint from his shorts. "Fierce, independent, Puerto Rican," he said, ticking the qualities off on his

fingers. “She’s not a Pekingese; she’s a Puerto Ricanese. Look at her — tiny but insane enough to take down an empire.”

AOC bared her tiny teeth and yapped again to underline the point.

Darcy laughed, her earlier nervousness dissolving into a ripple of absurdity. Cole smiled too, a little wearily, still unsure whether he was in the middle of a meet-cute or a hostage situation.

“What do you do, Cole?” Tristan asked, a hint of performance in his smile.

Cole smiled weakly, hands shoved in the pockets of his fraying khakis.

“I’m... uh... not doing anything right now.”

“Oh, I’ve been there,” Tristan said sympathetically, with a world-weary sigh.

“I’m there right now!” Juan laughed, throwing up jazz hands.

Darcy seized the moment, switching into life coach mode.

“Cole’s a writer.”

“Not really a writer,” Cole mumbled, instantly undermining.

“Yeah, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“YEAH, YOU ARE!” Darcy hissed under her breath, her teeth flashing. “You’re a fucking writer. Don’t embarrass me!”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, I’m not a writer until I’ve written something worth reading.”

Darcy spun back toward Tristan and Juan with fierce brightness. “Get this — Cole’s dad? On the New York Times Bestseller list. Twice.”

“Well, once,” Cole corrected weakly. “And even then, it was, you know... back when people still bought books.”

“Just trying to make you sound interesting,” Darcy injected after an awkward silence, filled only by the Pekingese snorting and clicking its nails against the sidewalk.

Tristan, ever the diplomat, broke it with a syrupy grin. “I don’t want to interrupt the fun, but—what was Omar’s contact info again?”

“Oh, you can Google him,” Darcy said, casual now, her manic energy shifting like a stage light. “*After Everything I’ve Done For You*. That’s the name of the agency.”

Juan scribbled furiously in his bedazzled notepad: “*After Everything I’ve Done For You* — Omar — Apartment magician.”

Then Darcy leaned forward, dropping her voice to a scandalous stage whisper. “Something you should know: He’s ... Palestinian, so he’s been through it all.”

“Ohhh...!” Juan wheezed, fanning himself dramatically with his notepad. “So it’s like that kind of listing.”

“And our landlord is Israeli,” Cole slipped.

Tristan’s eyes widened, intrigued. “Oh, so it’s not just rent-controlled — it’s conflict-controlled.”

“It’s a complicated relationship,” Darcy said, flashing a tense grin. “But they respect each other.”

Juan laughed tightly. “New York’s just feudalism with square footage. You either learn to game it or you end up sleeping in your kombucha tub.”

A moment passed, and AOC, having grown bored of her circle patrol, flopped onto the pavement and began gnawing at a leaf with clinical precision.

"I mean, we shouldn't even have landlords and realtors," Juan said suddenly, voice unusually sharp. "It's such a medieval concept."

Tristan raised an eyebrow. "And yet, we're still asking for Omar's card."

Juan shrugged. "Let's just call him, just for the fuck of it. I said I was exhausted, not radicalized."

Cole's mouth opened, then closed.

"Well," Tristan said brightly, breaking the tension. "You're both lovely, and your energy is divine. Manifesting great things for you."

"Manifesting central air," Juan added. "And fewer historical allegories in the lease agreement."

"Yeah, get in touch if you ever want to have a 'throuple,'" Cole joked.

Tristan and Juan pause — long enough to register discomfort. Then Tristan laughs too hard. Juan bites his lip.

Juan squinted at Cole like he'd grown a second head. "Did you just invite us to a threesome?"

Cole smiled — not smug, just calm, like someone who'd finally figured out how to speak in a foreign dialect.

"Cole," Tristan says slowly, "that's either the funniest thing you've said or the scariest," before he and Juan bust out laughing.

"I'll take either," Cole shrugs.

Darcy watched him, surprised — not just by the joke but by the fact that, for once, he said something that stuck.

Juan wiped tears from his eyes. "We have to hang out. Seriously. Text us. We'll set something up. Drinks, dinner, dungeon, whatever!"

They exchanged numbers, air-kissed their goodbyes with exaggerated flair, then strolled off, AOC tottering ahead like a tiny, four-

legged prophet; Darcy turned to Cole, her voice low and brittle.
“*What the fuck was that?*”

“What?”

“You joked about a throuple. *With them*. Cole! I’m like: you don’t joke about things like that with a Gay couple unless you mean it.”

Cole shrugged. “Exactly why it works. Technically, throuples are three—say, one straight man, two gay. And since you’re a woman ...”

Darcy shifted her weight, suddenly hyper-aware of her limbs. “I—what are you even talking about?”

Cole stopped, turned to her. Calm. Steady.

“You have to read people, Darce. We walk around here with our cute little apartment story and my sad little khakis—what are we really saying about ourselves? We’re hicks from the sticks, nothing more than fresh meat on the street. No, here’s the signal we want to put out: we may look like virgins, but we’re way open.”

“Open?! Open for what?!”

“Whatever comes our way. You said it yourself — New York is a performance. That was mine.”

“Call us if you ever want to have a throuple!” Darcy mocked Cole.

She stared at him, still trying to catch up. “Thing is, you assume the role of the quiet writer type throughout the conversation—God only knows what you’re thinking! And then when you do speak, it’s like some character you invented putting words in your mouth!”

Darcy let out a startled laugh, then covered her mouth. “Jesus, Cole.”

Cole started walking again, slower now, thoughtful.

Darcy shook her head, still stunned. “You’re scaring me.”

“Good,” Cole said. “Maybe now we’ll survive.”

The apartment was tiny, but to Darcy and Cole, it was a kingdom.

Darcy had already picked out the corner by the sealed fireplace for her yoga routines. There, the light pooled golden for thirty minutes before slinking into shadows. She pictured a bamboo mat, maybe a fiddle-leaf fig, maybe an Instagram post tagged:

#GratitudeFromTheWestVillage.

She would expand her coaching brand, Positive Lifestyle Architect, from this very corner. Manhattan was her launchpad. All she needed was space to breathe.

Cole had humbler ambitions: write something. Anything. He planned to perch at the wobbly kitchen counter, punching out articles, maybe even starting the novel he kept re-editing in his mind. He had a shelf of exactly seven books—one of them a tattered Great Gatsby inscribed by his father: Never let them tell you what success is.

His father had been a failed writer who'd succeeded once. Cole wasn't even that.

The bedroom barely fit their queen-sized bed. The door scraped the mattress when it opened, turning entry into a slow dance of hip-and-pivot. A single grated window caught just enough moonlight to make the claustrophobia seem romantic.

They fell asleep that first night tangled together, breathing in sync for once.

Outside, the trees rustled gently.

Inside, the toilet murmured like a man remembering a war.

They almost believed they were safe.

Then a key turned in the lock.

Cole sat up. "Did you hear that?"

Darcy, half-asleep, swatted him in the chest and rolled over. "This better be life or death, you just destroyed my circadian rhythm."

"Darcy. Wake up. Someone's in our apartment."

"Maybe it's the building settling."

"The building is not settling into our apartment."

A faint breath—slow, deliberate.

Then click. Buzz. The kitchen light flicked on.

Darcy bolted upright. "*Is that... a grinder?*"

Cole crouched behind the half-unpacked couch. "Are we getting robbed?"

"No one robs with a conical burr grinder. This is either murder or very expensive espresso."

They peeked around the corner.

Omar.

Omar from *After Everything I've Done For You* Realty. Wearing sweat-pants, a button-down shirt, and an expression like this was all deeply inconvenient for him.

Sparks flew from the grinder—a faint smell of scorched metal.

"OMAR?!" they shouted.

"Good evening," he said calmly, not looking up. "I apologize for waking you. Small error in paperwork. You must move out by six."

"*Move out?!?*" Darcy squawked.

“Yes, yes. Very sorry. But new tenants are coming. I am preparing keys.”

“We have a lease,” Cole said.

Omar gave a diplomatic shrug. “New lease has been issued. Unfortunate miscommunication. Opportunity for you. Fresh start!”

He unplugged the grinder with care, smoothing invisible dust off the counter.

“This is old rule,” he explained gently. “Obscure. Subchapter Three, Clause 44B. In case of administrative error, occupancy reverts to—how you say?—best and final offer.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped. “That’s not a thing.”

“In New York,” Omar said with a smile, “everything is a thing.”

Cole stepped forward. “You can’t break into people’s homes at three a.m.”

Omar looked wounded. “My friend. Where I come from? Fifteen people sleep in one room. Sometimes sixteen if cousin visits. Goats too. Very cozy.”

He gestured fondly around the apartment. “This? This is luxury. And what is luxury if not to be shared with others who love it more?”

Darcy, twitching. “You’re evicting us... democratically?”

“Exactly!” Omar beamed. “The people speak. You know—democracy, capitalism, Craigslist.”

Cole raised his phone. “I’m calling the cops.”

Omar shrugged. “Police may come. Maybe they say, ‘Omar, bad man.’ Maybe they say, ‘Omar, practical thinker.’ Police in New York are very philosophical.”

“*Cole, do something!*” Darcy shrieked.

Cole froze. “You’re the one who helps people live their best lives.”

Darcy grabbed him by the shirt. “*You’re the writer!* There has to be a short story where this happens. Solve it like one of those little narrative puzzles you like so much!”

“You’re the Positive Lifestyle Architect. *Build a solution!*”

Darcy turned to Omar, vibrating with rage. “This is criminal, Omar! We trusted you!”

Omar looked genuinely disappointed.

“You know,” he said softly, “when I small boy, we all gathered sitting together on the dusty floors to watch American television, dreaming of this life. Of American *woman*. Beautiful blonde. Eyes as blue as the sky. So confident. So free.”

Darcy blinked.

Omar continued: “Now I see—it is the nightmare. Angry. Yelling. *Me first!* I am very disillusioned. Like when you meet childhood idols and they smell like vinegar.”

Darcy screamed and lunged at him.

Cole shouted, “*Darcy, no!*”

Omar calmly sidestepped and unholstered a tiny pink pepper spray canister. Pssst!

Darcy staggered backward into Cole. Both collapsed.

A moment later, duct tape hissed from the kitchen. Before Darcy and Cole knew what was happening, they were tied back-to-back in the living room, blinking through watery eyes.

“Sorry to do this, but you artistic ones are always the most difficult!”

Omar then took a step back to admire his work, nodded approvingly, and turned toward the door.

"Come, please," he called.

The door swung open, and Tristan and Juan paraded in, dragging two massive Louis Vuitton suitcases and their tiny, furious Pekingese.

"AOC, honey, you're home!" Juan trilled.

They followed Omar eagerly into the apartment, clucking over the exposed brick, the 'original fixtures,' and the 'open concept kitchen.' They barely glanced at Cole and Darcy — who lay squirming, zip-tied on the floor, gagged with strips of their own pillowcases.

Tristan paused briefly, smiling at them.

"Oh my God, you guys!" Tristan chirped. "It's so cool to see familiar faces already. What a small world!"

"Well, here it is! It is not everything I told you!" Omar proudly smiled.

"It so is, Omar!"

"I go to war for my clients! After everything I've done for you!"

"So, just a heads up," Juan said, leaning towards Darcy and Cole, "Tristan and I are moving forward with a formal complaint. Legal action, technically. For the unwanted sexual overture made in a public space."

Darcy and Cole's eyes widened. Juan offered nothing but a sympathetic smile as if announcing a charity bake sale.

"I mean, we laughed at the time, but trauma's funny like that—delayed onset. You understand."

AOC, the Pekingese, patrolled in slow circles around Darcy and Cole, her tiny paws clicking with militaristic precision. She paused every few steps to stare them down, growling softly at the first whimper or sigh as if daring them to blink wrong.

Tristan, now lighting a palo santo stick, chimed in without turning around. “It wasn’t even the suggestion of a throuple. It was the timing. Very aggressive. We were vulnerable. AOC hadn’t even peed yet.”

Juan nodded solemnly. “So yeah, hope you don’t mind. Nothing personal. Just cleansing the energy and also suing you a little.”

He patted Darcy on the knee like a nurse. “And don’t worry—we’ll keep it civil. Like, very civil court.”

“I’m thinking we knock this wall down,” Tristan said, gesturing at a structural column like a cult leader revealing where the portal opens. “Open the whole space up. Something with flow.”

Juan nodded, his arms crossed, the tension in his brow as severe as if the future of democracy hinged on this remodel. “Yes — knock down everything that feels ‘resistant.’ This apartment has emotional blockages.”

“Built-ins over here,” Tristan added, sketching wildly into a Moleskine. “A minimalist altar — something with lines.”

Juan clapped. “Oh my God — lines.”

AOC let out a single bark — high, sharp, judicial.

Juan pointed toward the sealed fireplace. “What if we turned that into a wet bar? Something elegant, but also slutty.”

“I like ‘slutty,’” Tristan said, flipping a page. “We should lean into slutty.”

Darcy let out a muffled grunt from her stool. AOC whipped her head toward her, teeth bared. Cole instinctively leaned forward to shield her — and was met with a guttural snarl from the floor.

“Don’t test her,” Juan warned. “She smells fear and capitalism.”

A lavender cloud of incense drifted diagonally across the exposed brick like something summoned during a séance for unresolved trauma.

Juan twirled in a slow circle, palms out, barefoot on the hardwood. "It's amazing what a room does without negative energy clogging up the chakra ducts."

Tristan was sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Darcy and Cole, who were still zip-tied and gagged like failed escape artists.

"I miss him," Tristan murmured, staring wistfully at the sealed fireplace.

"Who? Omar?" Juan asked.

"There was something about him. A gravitas. Like he'd seen things. Real things. Pain."

Juan nodded solemnly. "And fear. Like a man who once had to flee in the middle of the night with just his passport and a moka pot."

"Exactly," Tristan whispered. "His eyes said I have been broken, and yet I remain whole."

"Not sexual," Juan clarified, raising a finger.

"No, no. Paternal. Surrogate daddy-ish."

"Absolutely. Though—if you two were to run off ..."

"Run off?" Tristan said, baffled, "Why are you even going there?"

"I saw the way you were leering at him, Tristan!"

"Juan," Tristan gently chided, "this is you—*projecting* again."

"Oh, is *that* who *this* is? Or maybe this is just someone who is not ready to lose someone else to some sweaty Palestinian, *Tris-tan!*"

Okay? I know he's fucking gorgeous and earthy, but you don't have to leer at him like you're not getting it at home."

"*I was not leering!*" Tristan protested.

"You were leering like you wanted to smoke his ass!" Juan snapped back.

Darcy suddenly let out a gagged, wet grunt. AOC barked.

"Is there something you'd like to add, Darcy? I'm sure Cole has something on his mind as well." Juan said, quite perturbed.

Tristan leaned back on his hands. "What do we do with them? I mean, the energy has shifted. We can't just let them go. That's practically gentrification."

Juan sat beside him, pulling AOC into his lap. "Let's spitball."

AOC growled low, like a tiny espresso machine warming up.

"Art installation?" Juan offered. "Something like a '*Cisgenres—Not Okay*' display."

Tristan tilted his head. "Hmmm, maybe. What about mixed media? We could wrap them in newspapers. *The Times* for Cole because he clearly loathes himself. *Daily Mail* for her—she vibrates like someone raised on sidebar content."

Darcy squirmed and hissed behind her gag.

"Ooh, she's passionate," Juan noted. "What about a performance piece? They scream their microaggressions live on the hour. Tip jar for reparations!"

Tristan twirled a palo santo stick between his fingers. "Mmm, too edgy."

Cole raised one brow—just one. He was too tired to raise two.

Juan paced the living room like a militant choreographer, arms gesturing with wild precision. “Okay. Here’s a thought experiment-slash-practical strategy: we offer them as hostages to Omar as leverage.”

Tristan’s head whipped around. “I’m sorry—what?”

“You know,” Juan said, too casually, “he uses them to negotiate with the landlord. The Israeli guy. Full building occupancy in exchange for the straight couple.”

“If only they were worth the karma, Juan.” Tristan pointed directly at his own heart. “I have boundaries.”

They stood in a stalemate of principle and delusion. AOC broke the silence with a soft, approving growl.

Juan nodded. “AOC votes for un-gagging.”

Juan knelt behind Cole and ripped the pillowcase strip from his mouth with the flourish of a magician. Cole gasped. Not for air—he’d been breathing fine—but for dignity.

Darcy followed a moment later, coughing like someone being reborn through a dust storm.

“You absolute lunatics,” she spat.

“Hello to you, too, sage demon,” Tristan said flatly.

“You can’t just keep people!” she screamed. “This is kidnapping!”

Juan blinked. “Oh, honey, it’s not kidnapping. It’s curation.”

Cole licked his lips. “This is illegal. Even in New York.”

“Is it, though?” Tristan said. “Have you read your lease?”

“You stole our apartment! We don’t have a lease!” Darcy shrieked.

“Exactly,” Juan said, as if she’d just solved a riddle.

Cole leaned forward. "Okay. Okay. Can we just... talk like normal people?"

"Like a throuple?" Tristan asked, eyes narrowing.

Cole opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Tristan leaned in. "Do you know what that moment felt like? Being objectified as sex objects?"

Juan chimed in. "It felt like someone reached inside our bodies and pulled our souls out through our asshole chakras!"

Darcy blinked. "That's not even a thing."

"Oh it is," Juan said. "Ask my chiropractor."

Cole spoke slowly. "It was a joke. I make jokes. I'm a writer."

"Oh! Oh!" Tristan snapped, clapping his hands like a game show buzzer had gone off. "*A writer!* That explains the crippling emotional vacancy and disregard for social cues."

"Writers are allowed to be a little insane," Darcy said. "It's—occupational."

"Cole's not insane," Juan replied. "Cole's disrespectful. There's a difference. Insane makes great art. Disrespectful makes two gay men feel like fleshlamps in some twisted straight-gay-trouple sex romp!"

Darcy tried. "We were just—trying to fit in."

"You tried too hard," Tristan hissed.

Juan stood, cracked his neck. "Well, time for the list."

Cole looked to Darcy. "There's a list?"

Juan unrolled the list like a royal scroll.

Cole looked up toward the ceiling.

Darcy muttered, "How bad could it be?"

"The following," Tristan announced, "is a list of our terms."

Cole groaned from the floor. "Why is it always a list with you people?"

Tristan didn't look at him. "*You people?* Because order, Cole. It's how we survived Catholic school, retail jobs, and 2016."

Juan clicked a remote. Satie's *Gymnopédie No.1* began to echo through the Sonos speaker. AOC circled the perimeter like a velvet-rope bouncer.

"Item One," Tristan began, voice low and ceremonial. "1600 hours of sensitivity training for Cole and an apology for the 'throuple' comment—via interpretive dance. No verbal language. Movement only."

Cole squinted. "Wait. But—how interpretive?"

"We're open to styles," Juan said generously. "Just not jazz. Too colonial."

"Item Two," Tristan went on, "Darcy must renounce the title 'Positive Lifestyle Architect' and all derivative branding."

Darcy's mouth opened like a wound. "*You can't unbrand me!*"

"Oh, honey, it's for your own good," Tristan said gently. "Do you even have the slightest notion of how pretentious 'Positive Lifestyle Architect' sounds?"

"Item Three," Juan said, flipping the parchment like a wedding officiant, "You will pack what remains of your dignity and accept ceremonial exile to Brooklyn."

Cole exhaled. "I knew that was coming."

“You’ll be placed in Crown Heights,” Juan said. “East side. Above a vintage apothecary that specializes in fermented oat tonics and dog treats made of moss.”

Darcy gasped. “We’re being banished?”

Tristan rolled up the parchment with a neat little snap. “We prefer the term transitioned.”

“I have clients,” Darcy said, grasping for leverage. “I have an audience.”

Cole turned to Darcy. “We can do this, Darce. I’ve heard good things about Crown Heights.”

Darcy stared at him. “Have you lost your mind? *I AM NOT FUCKING MOVING TO BROOKLYN!*”

AOC barked once.

Then again—sharper, sharper still.

Everyone froze.

There was a whistle—faint, high-pitched—and then:

BOOM.

The floor trembled. A concussive shock rolled through the walls. A decorative scone fell dramatically. Smoke puffed from the windowsill.

“Did someone just shell the building?!” Tristan asked, eyes wild, clutching the crown of succulents sliding off his head.

“I thought that was a gas line,” Juan whimpered.

“It was not a gas line,” Darcy snapped. “I’ve lived through at least two controlled burns in Malibu, and that had artillery overtones.”

Then, rattatatatatat. Machine gun fire. From outside. And very, very close.

"We're under attack! Untie us!" Darcy and Cole yelled to Tristan and Juan.

Everyone ducked—except AOC, who calmly walked to the door and sat, proud and serene, like she'd been waiting for this moment her entire life.

A moment later, the front door burst open.

OMAR.

Face covered in sweat and soot. Bleeding lightly from the bicep. Still in his sweatpants, trench coat flapping open like a cape. He looked like an exhausted freedom fighter who moonlighted as a motivational speaker.

"I told you," he wheezed, clutching the doorframe. "I told you I would go to war for you."

"Omar!" Tristan screamed.

Juan fainted on a pouf.

Darcy ran to Omar. *"You've been shot!"*

"I've been merely grazed," Omar corrected, holding up his arm. "I am not afraid to die for my beliefs!"

Cole blinked. "What is going on here? Who the hell is shooting at us?"

Omar looked up, eyes wild with purpose. His voice dropped into something reverent, vaguely haunted.

"My cousin. The landlord."

Silence.

“The Israeli landlord?” Tristan asked cautiously.

Omar hesitated. “Technically, I’m more Israeli than he is. In spirit, not in passport. Well, we share a grandmother. Sort of. It’s complicated. She’s more of a symbolic grandmother. By marriage. Through trauma.”

Juan looked horrified. “*So you’re family?*”

“He’s not my cousin cousin,” Omar clarified. “He’s... my brother. But not of blood. More spiritual. Like... next-gen Cain and Abel.”

Darcy squinted. “So you’re on the same side but also trying to kill each other?”

“Exactly,” Omar said, relieved someone understood. “But only when negotiations fail. Which they have. Repeatedly.”

Another explosion rattled the fire escape—a ceramic *‘Live Laugh Love’* tile shattered in the kitchen.

“He believes this building is his divine inheritance,” Omar continued, brushing drywall off his shoulder. “But I was here first. ‘No, you weren’t,’ he says, which is partly true. ‘You are realtor,’ he says, ‘I am landlord.’ Back and forth. It’s a long story.”

Cole slumped to the floor. “So we’re at war with your spiritual cousin. Over shared ancestral square footage that neither of you technically owns?”

“Close enough,” Omar said. “But it’s not personal. It’s generational. And we both love a good war.”

“I knew it,” Tristan whispered. “I knew that sealed fireplace was hiding trauma.”

Darcy stepped forward, shaking with adrenaline and decades of repressed privilege. “What do we do?”

"There are weapons in the hallway," Omar said briskly. "A duffel with everything you need. Pistols, walkie-talkies, artisanal throwing knives, one beret."

"A beret?" Juan groaned from the floor. "I can't fight in a beret. I'll look like a radical mime."

"Arm yourselves," Omar said. "If you want to stay, you must take a stand."

Darcy stepped forward like *Joan of Arc* with a yoga mat. "*I'll fight.*"

Cole turned to her. "*Are you insane?*"

"You heard him," she said. "If we want to stay ... we gotta fight! I never told you this, Cole, but I adjusted my personality in five separate interviews to secure this apartment for us. I'm not gonna just give up now!"

"Darcy, I am not cut out to fight a war over a rent-controlled apartment."

"You're a writer, Cole," she said, grabbing a pistol from the duffel Omar shoved through the door. "And writers survive everything. Hemingway had shrapnel in his ass and still managed to be insufferable."

Another burst of gunfire. A window cracked.

Juan sat up slowly, holding AOC. "This is above my chakra pay grade."

Tristan was in the corner, frantically searching 'queer militias' on his phone. "I don't know if I'm spiritually ready for guerrilla warfare."

"Ask her," Juan said suddenly, gripping AOC like she was holding the fate of their lease in her tiny paws. "She always knows what's right."

Everyone turned to AOC.

AOC closed her eyes.

Another burst of machine gun fire outside. She opened them.

Then barked once. Short. Sharp.

Omar nodded. “She’s in.”

Darcy turned to Cole. “Are you?”

Cole looked at the pistol. Then the walkie-talkie. Then the cracked ceiling. Then Tristan and Juan and Darcy and the smoking wall, where a motivational quote had once been stenciled.

He sighed. “Give me the beret.”

It had been more than a week since the siege began.

In that time, the apartment had become something between a commune, a bunker, and a theatrical residency for the emotionally overqualified. What once was sharp tension—lawsuits, microaggressions, pillowcase gags—had mellowed into a strange, intimate choreography of survival.

The bedroom now housed a tiered bunk bed system, custom-rigged from salvaged IKEA remnants and one ill-gotten chaise lounge. Darcy and Cole had claimed the top bunk—primarily for strategic advantage, partially for spite. Juan and Tristan took the bottom—saying it was for “accessibility,” but really for proximity to the wine crate they used as a nightstand-slash-weapons cache.

The living room was common ground. A war room by morning, a café by brunch, a low-budget speakeasy by candlelight. Their routines were synchronized now: shifts on the fire escape, meal rotation, water rationing, psychic check-ins, and exactly one communal

meltdown per day, to be performed dramatically and with appropriate lighting.

No one apologized anymore. They adapted.

The four had also enacted what Tristan called a “wartime celibacy statute ” to conserve energy and maintain spiritual alignment under siege conditions. The reasoning was half-mystical, half-logistical: arousal scattered the chi, blurred the focus, and made the hallway patrols sloppy.

"Desire is a peacetime luxury," Darcy had declared, arms crossed, eyes red from incense exposure. No one argued.

Not even Juan, who had once seduced a Whole Foods cashier using only eye contact and a pomegranate.

Now, they sublimated. They journaled. They did planks.

AOC barked anytime someone lingered too long near another's bunk, a tiny moral enforcer in faux fur. The system worked—sort of. They were tense, yes, but profoundly alert. Monastic. Sexy in theory. Miserable in practice. Focused.

They had, through smoke and absurdity, become a unit.

Not friends exactly. Not family.

Comrades.

“You need more contour, Cole,” Tristan said, dabbing bronzer along his jaw like a battlefield stylist dressing a man for martyrdom. “You look like a haunted bagel.”

Cole sat underneath a bullet-scarred kitchen window, preparing to livestream. He clutched his phone like a grenade of truth, rehearsing lines in his head.

“You know,” Tristan said, dipping a finger into concealer, “this isn't the first time my people have battled on these streets. Let me tell

you, before we were a ‘demographic,’ before Rainbow Capitalism turned our pain into a pride playlist—we dialed up some serious resistance. *Stonewall* was no party from what I hear.”

“So if someone dares judge me,” Tristan whispered, dotting Cole’s under-eye with something faintly shimmering, “I tell them being under siege is in my cultural DNA.”

Tristan gave Cole a pat of confidence. Cole cleared his throat, lifted the phone, and hit record.

“Once a quiet tree-lined street tucked away in the West Village—where rents were historically inaccessible and squirrels wore artisanal indifference—has now become its own little war zone, spawning a conflict between blood brothers and landlords.”

Tristan made a slight gesture: good, keep going.

Cole adjusted his tone. “And what of the inhabitants of this humble pre-war, current-war brownstone? How have they adapted, resisted, survived?”

“I found four cans of water chestnuts,” Darcy announced as she swung in from the fire escape, dropped her gear, and peeled off her gloves. “They’re in the ration pile.”

Juan had already begun plating brunch. “Brunch is served,” he called. “Today’s theme is scarcity chic.”

On the table: one soft avocado in mid-breakdown, thirty lentils per person, a tablespoon of almond paste spread lovingly across a cedar shingle, and half a can of peaches still tinged with debris.

“Anything gluten in this hellscape?” Darcy said, breathless.

“We have a stale baguette,” Tristan said. “But Juan has declared it ‘holy.’”

“I licked it,” Juan offered, deadpan.

Darcy waved it off. "I've had worse at Coachella."

"I lived on ant larvae in the Andes for a week once," Juan quipped. "More protein than beef. And honey, I've had my share of beef."

Tristan snapped a photo of the table. "I'm calling this 'Occupation Elegance.' It's going in the zine."

Cole sat, still buzzed from his own narration. "If this is the end of civilization, at least we're seated."

Darcy turned to Cole. "Update on the outside world?"

He gestured to his phone. "Three thousand views. One hate comment. It said, 'This is war porn for liberals.'"

Juan raised his glass of fermented nettle tonic. "To War Porn for Liberals!"

"To the West Village," Darcy added.

Tristan sat down, adjusting a scarf. "Is it weird I'm...happy?"

Darcy scooped lentils with a bent spoon. "It's not weird. We're not just defending our apartment—we're becoming it. I am this square footage now."

Juan raised his glass again and looked across the table at Darcy and Cole with something bordering on reverence. "To Darcy and Cole. In the short time we've known you," he began, "we've misjudged you."

Tristan nodded solemnly, dramatically. "We thought you were textbook Connecticut. Possibly voted third-party on purpose."

Juan went on. "We 'kink-shamed' you out of our insecurities. And for that, we apologize."

Tristan added, "Who are we to judge another person's 'throuple' fantasy? We're all sexual beasts in the end!"

“It’s... honestly very queer,” Juan said. “And that’s what unnerves us most.”

Darcy blinked. “Are we being honored or condemned?”

Another explosion shook the glass. AOC scurried under the table, dragging an unexploded tear gas canister she’d claimed as her toy. But no one else flinched.

Cole whispered softly to his phone: “Day twelve. The kink-shaming has subsided, morale is high, and we’ve begun mistaking survival for aesthetics. Which means... we’re thriving.”

Then they heard a slow, deliberate knock.

Three taps. A pause. Then, two more.

Everyone froze.

Darcy crept to the door and pressed her ear against the frame. “Who goes there?”

A pause.

“After everything I’ve done for you.”

They exhaled in unison.

Darcy unlatched the door and pulled it open like a velvet curtain.

Omar stepped in through the doorway, set down his bag like a conquering hero, and pulled out a single bottle of vintage champagne—‘liberated,’ he explained, from the landlord’s basement stockpile.

They gasped. They applauded. Juan kissed the label. Tristan all but wept.

Darcy wiped down a coffee mug and offered it as a stand-in flute. Cole reached for the wine key with the solemnity of a field medic.

Omar unscrewed the cage and popped the cork with one practiced twist, the sound like a celebratory gunshot—only gentler.

He poured slowly, reverently, leaned back against the cracked refrigerator, and said, “I have news from the front. There was a skirmish on the first floor.”

Everyone went still. Even AOC sat down.

“Unit 1M. Madame Altalina.”

Tristan clutched his chest. “Oh my God! The Mezzo-Soprano on the first floor?”

Omar nodded, eyes gleaming. “Yes. The Landlord’s men tried to seize her grand piano. Said it was a luxury amenity outside her lease terms. She refused to surrender it.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “How did she fight them off?”

“She sang,” Omar said simply. “A Puccini aria so precise it shattered three light bulbs and caused one of the interns to question his sexuality.”

Tristan burst into applause. “That woman is a national treasure.”

Juan raised his glass. “To Altalina.”

They drank.

And for a moment, it felt like they had won.

Omar let the silence linger. Then, quietly, he said, “I’ve discussed a truce with my cousin, the landlord. We both agree that too much blood has been spilled!”

Everyone turned. Champagne paused mid-air. “But there are conditions,” Omar added. “He’s going co-op.”

All four moaned. The sound was somewhere between grief and lactose intolerance.

Juan dropped his spoon. “There must be a trust fund baby among us. That’s the only way this makes sense.”

“Is that what this war was all about?” Darcy asked, almost laughing. “A co-op board application? With headshots?”

Cole sank into his chair. “The last rent-controlled building in the West Village, devoured by equity shares and brunch vouchers.”

Tristan clutched his scarf like a widow. “I knew something was off when I smelled almond flour in the hallway. The bourgeois always come in with nut-based things.”

“Or we can keep fighting,” Omar said.

Cole asked suddenly. “We can keep fighting? For this tiny, overpriced rectangle of hardwood and trauma?”

Cole glanced toward the wall, chipped from a shell blast but still retaining its original detail. He looked at the blinking red light on his phone, still recording.

“The war may be ending. And I think we’re all a little terrified that peace... means figuring out who we are without the conflict.”

Omar smiled softly but with the sadness of a man who’s seen both leases and legacies shredded.

“You ask who we are without the conflict,” he said. “Maybe the answer can be found in—who are we *in* conflict?”

Omar opened his palms like he was presenting invisible receipts.

He looked around the table, not accusing—just observant.

“In conflict, you are whatever the room requires. The fierce one. The broken one. The symbol. The joke. The threat.”

AOC barked once, as if confirming the thesis.

Outside, the night was silent. The wind whispered past the fire escape like a neighbor too tired to knock.

Inside, the champagne fizzed and fizzled.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to. The war might be over. But they had their square footage. Their routines. Each other.

And in New York, that's more peace than most ever get.

Cole's voice cut the silence.

"Has anyone here actually seen the landlord?" he asked slowly. "I mean, in person. With Omar. In the same room."

Everyone turned.

Juan blinked. "Oh my God!"

Cole pressed on. "Think about it. Omar disappears, and the landlord attacks. Omar appears again, champagne in tow—now the war's over."

"It all makes sense, Cole! When Tristan asked Omar if the Israeli landlord was attacking us, he said, 'Technically, I'm more Israeli than he is!'"

Tristan gasped. "This is like Andrew Lloyd Webber produced a one-man *Phantom of the Opera*! But instead of a mask, it's a co-op board! You may be sexy as fuck, Omar, but you're nothing but a charlatan."

Omar didn't flinch. He merely adjusted his scarf, then said, with great calm: "They say the same thing about the landlord."

That gave them pause.

"They think I'm the illusion. That there is no realtor. Just a landlord with good taste and an overactive imagination."

Darcy narrowed her eyes. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Omar said, standing, "it's convenient for you to eliminate one of us! It's convenient to declare one side fake. If you erase the agent, you erase the betrayal. If you erase the landlord, you erase the power. Either way, you deny there's even a victim. Or a villain. You make the whole war abstract."

Omar walked to the window again, staring out through the fractured glass.

"You know the real tragedy?" he said. "Once you pick your side, you have to live there. Even after the fighting stops, my cousin and I ... will never change. He calls me the squatter, I call him the occupier, but the truth is, we both have keys. War casts us in these roles, and once you've been cast, no one remembers it was a family story. Peace?" He shrugged. "Peace would mean stepping out of character. And neither of us knows how to do that anymore."

Cole studied him, uncertain now if he was staring at a man, a myth, or the most successful housing scam in lower Manhattan.

But Omar simply turned and smiled, that same vague, radiant ambiguity.

"I just want you to be happy," he said. "Even after everything I've done for you."

Omar looked at each of them, his face glowing with the quiet dignity of a man who'd duct-taped a dream together more than once.

Juan translated, "My New Yorican Grandfather used to say: If you're going to screw me, at least kiss me first. I'd say Omar accomplished that."

Omar smiled faintly. "You're welcome." And just like that, he stepped away and vanished into the hallway.

No one spoke for a moment.

They stood there, glasses in hand, watching the empty doorway like it might speak again.

Then Tristan raised his glass.

“To the co-op.”

Juan clinked glasses with Tristan. “To the absurdity of shared ownership.”

Darcy nodded. “To whatever this is now.”

Cole looked around the apartment—the scorch marks, the bunk beds, the tiny war they’d made a home in—and said softly, “To enduring.”

And they drank quietly—roommates now and something that could only happen in Greenwich Village and only during peacetime negotiated with palo santo and passive aggression, Darcy and Cole, Tristan and Juan came to cohabitate in the tiniest of apartments—four souls, and square footage so small it required synchronized breathing.

It wasn’t a throuple. It transcended throupledom. It was something stranger, sturdier, beautifully ill-defined.

Eventually, they bought the place—through a complex arrangement involving ghost LLCs and a failed tech angel in Tel Aviv—and decorated it together: brutalist shelving, bisexual lighting, and a wet bar shaped like a question mark.

AOC remained neutral, loyal only to the scent of power and the rustle of unattended food wrappers. She had switched alliances more times than anyone cared to count. Ultimately, she came down firmly on the side of whoever dropped the most crumbs. And in the new co-op structure, she appointed herself Treasurer.

No one contested it.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

So, they lived quite happily ever after. Or close enough. Which, in New York, is ever after.

CLOSED CASKET

Vic Martelli's crew ran uptown, everything north of Central Park South. They had the high-end card rooms on the Upper East Side, and all the dope moving through Harlem. Ran it classy, too; never had to shout when cash could do the talking.

Carmine Russo's boys—they had the West Side—prostitution, dock-side smuggling, and a bunch of nickel-and-dime street rackets that kept the lights on.

Martelli was silk. Russo was sandpaper.

They worked together fine, mostly—until somebody got in the way. So, when word got out that someone real big got “what was coming to him,” mourning incorporated went into action.

The thing is, the hit was so hush-hush, even who got whacked was a secret.

Nevertheless, both families were urged to show up to pay their respects. Business is business, and everyone who's involved knows the consequences of stepping out of line. That said, when a brother-

in-arms takes a bullet, men of respect put aside differences and give him a decent send-off.

Besides, funerals are a great way to catch up.

So, they picked a funeral joint in midtown, Lombardi & Finch, which was located on Park Avenue. High-end. Looked less like a funeral home, more like the lobby of a five-star hotel where the only thing that dies is your credit score. White marble floors, fresh flowers, and Bocelli on Spotify. It was out of this world.

Like clockwork, associates from all over the tri-state started arriving, and still, no one had the slightest clue who was dead.

The Martellis came in first—sharp suits, shoes, all that uptown polish. Then the Russos walked in, but they looked like they'd been through a door the hard way.

Everyone shook hands, nodded, kissed cheeks.

Then the rumors started. You would think someone knew something. But no —not even in the bathroom, where people usually loosen up. Just “Our Beloved” in gold letters, like it was a wedding invitation. And the casket? Nice custom Italian job, cost a pretty penny. Shiny bronze lid. Air-tight closure, tighter than a bookie's lips on tax day.

Lombardi laid out a nice spread. Buffalo Mozzarella. Prosciutto. Tortellini Primavera. Champagne. Who could resist?

But who was the stiff?

“Could be Matty the Magician,” a Martelli associate blurted over by the espresso station. “This would have been just like him, too. Now you see me, now you don't.”

A Russo guy cut in. “The Magician? Saw him on Instagram last week with two blondes and a boat down in Miami. Up to his old tricks.”

CLOSED CASKET

"I heard Jimmy D'apalito was on death's door," a younger cousin tossed in.

"He's still running numbers outta his goomah's bodega in Queens. I just lost five grand to him last Tuesday."

"I'm thinking this has got to be Lou the Jew. The Jews have closed caskets. It only makes sense."

"But that was Lou's nickname. He wasn't a Jew per se, we just called him that."

"Like I didn't know he wasn't a Jew? I'm saying he might have converted without telling anyone. And this is how he decided to throw it up in our faces."

They ran through names like they were pulling raffle tickets, but every time, somebody had a reason why the guy wasn't lying in that box. It was like playing Guess Who? with the whole damn city and finding out every card's still in play.

Then Vito, a guy from the Russo side, leaned in over the canapé tray and said, "You know, if it's closed casket, it's 'cause the face is gone. Right?" Vito shrugged, "That's Martelli's thing."

A couple of Martelli guys bristled. "*Whoa, hang on. What the fuck you talkin' about? You think this was us?!*"

"All I'm saying is it don't add up," Vito cut them off.

Vic Martelli just sipped his drink, "Since when is disfigurement our thing, Vito?"

One of Carmine's lieutenants smirks. "Vito's right, this ain't got our fingerprints on it. That only leaves you. Besides, if this was us, we'd be home taking bets on how long 'til you find out it was us."

The theory hung there. Nobody wanted to admit it, but there's a

certain logic: you don't close a casket unless what's inside is either missing something important... or too important to show.

Vito looked across. "So, who gets to retaliate? That's my question!"

"Nobody's retaliating!"

"Nobody's retaliating; meanwhile, there's a dead body! My only conclusion is that someone has *already* retaliated pre-emptively. How's it gonna look if we don't hit back?"

"How do you know that dead body ain't a Martelli?"

"Then gimme a fuckin' crow bar and lemme open that God damn casket right now!"

"Settle down, Vito! Nobody gets to hit back until we're certain!"

"Certain of what?!"

Suddenly, Antoinette Francese pulls up in a Lana Turner outfit.

"Oh, Jesus. Here comes trouble."

The doors banged open like she was Judge Judy making her courtroom entrance; heels clicking, hips swaying, dress in mourning black but cut like she was attending a red carpet event. She had the hair, the jewelry, the attitude. She had ties to both families; her father, Albert, was a Capo before the families split into two factions.

She stopped dead center in the aisle, both hands in the air like she was calling for divine judgment. "Who did this? Can I know? *WHO WANTS TO TELL ME RIGHT HERE AND NOW WHO KILLED THIS MAN?!*" her voice bouncing off the marble.

The whole room went still. Martellis. Russos. Even Mr. Finch, the undertaker, froze with the champagne bottle halfway tilted.

"When I find out who is responsible for the death of this man—" she

jabbed a finger toward the closed casket like it was a defendant in court, “—I will *personally* take care of them myself!”

She took a breath and paced, “I don’t care if you’re family, friend, priest, I don’t give a fuck if you’re the Pope, you’re all dead! I will put a bullet in every single one of you, so help me God!”

“Ms. Francese, perhaps you would like a glass of champagne,” Mr. Finch offered.

“I wouldn’t drink that toilet water with your mouth,” she snarled.

Then Antoinette whirled on the crowd, pacing like a prosecutor. “You *disgust* me—ALL of you! Look at you! Dressed up in your little suits, sippin’ champagne like this is a freakin’ wedding reception, while *this man* is lying here, cold, because of *you!*”

She jabbed her finger again, moving through the crowd.

“You! Yeah, you, Joey Russo! Who supplied you with whores when you needed whores? He did! Without him, you’re selling used Hondas in Newark!”

“And you, Tommy frickin’ lyin’ dirtbag Martelli, you were barely scrapin’ by sellin’ nickel bags to pregnant 15-year-old Dominican junkies girls and their miserable, rotten, sewer rat boyfriends! Who gave you a leg up? Who gave you something to live for?”

Nobody moved. Nobody took a breath. Nobody knew who the hell she was talking about, but the guilt level in the room could choke a horse.

A couple of guys instinctively took a step back as Antoinette gave them the once-over again.

“Oh, you’re all lookin’ around like you don’t know what I’m talkin’ about. Please! You’re *all* guilty. Every last one of you!”

Finally, some mook from the Martelli side cleared his throat.

“Uh... Antoinette, sweetheart... forgive us, but we’re all a little lost here. This is gonna sound... I don’t know... but we’re not sure whose funeral this is.”

A ripple of uneasy laughter died as soon as it began. Joey Russo, never knowing when to shut up, piled on.

“Not to be insensitive or anything, but who’s the deceased?”

Antoinette’s head snapped toward him, her scowl cutting across the room.

“Who’s the deceased?” she echoed, her voice low, dangerous.

Another cousin muttered, too loud to be ignored.

“Everybody’s in the dark, for Christ’s sake. No one’s got a fuckin’ clue who we’re supposed to be grieving for!”

The air tightened. Antoinette froze, her shoulders stiffening. Then, very slowly—like a horror movie monster about to turn on its prey—she pivoted her head toward the cousin. Her eyes widened, her lips peeled back just enough to spit the words.

“You disrespect this man ...” her voice climbing in pitch “... and now you claim *not to know him?*”

She stormed over, heels stabbing the marble, and before the poor guy could back up, she smacked him across the left cheek—*whack!*—then the right—*whack!*—then the left again just for symmetry. “Maybe you’ll remember this,” she hissed, punctuating it with one last open-handed crack that echoed off the casket.

The guy just stood there, slack-jawed, like he wasn’t sure if he should apologize or call a dentist.

Antoinette spun on her heel, muttering curses in Italian, stormed down the aisle, and threw the doors open so hard the hinges groaned. The lilies shook. Then the doors slammed behind her.

For a second, nobody moved. Then, like after a tornado passed, the whole room exhaled at once. Someone in the back muttered, "So does that ... narrow down the possibilities for anyone?"

Martelli's guys shifted their weight, straightened their ties, and avoided eye contact. Russo's men looked around at each other warily. It was as if the room had just been hit by an earthquake, with everyone waiting to see if there would be an aftershock.

Then the smell of roasted lamb drifted in from the buffet room, followed by Bocelli's voice swelling from the speakers.

That's when the new players arrived. Heads turned.

Not street guys. No muscle. No history. Just three men and a woman in tailored suits worth more than most people's bail, carrying leather portfolios and that faint smell of money that's never had fingerprints on it.

They moved like they owned the place, because, judging by the buffet spread and the catering staff, they did.

The woman in front, perfect hair, perfect smile, the kind of confidence you rent by the quarter-hour in mergers, walked right between Vic and Carmine like they were two potted plants in her way. "Gentlemen," she said. "We'll be handling the transition."

Vic's voice was all velvet and razor. "Transition?"

She nodded toward the casket as if it were a podium at a shareholder meeting. "The entity formerly represented here will now be operated under our corporate umbrella. Full absorption. Streamlined operations. Shared resources."

Translation: *We own you now.*

Carmine's mouth twitched. "And what do we get out of this?"

“Continued relevance,” she said, flipping open a folder. “And quarterly dividends. All of this—” she gestured to the buffet, the opera, the floral arrangements “—was willed to both families. With one stipulation: his identity is never revealed.”

That landed like a brick wrapped in silk. They didn’t know who was in the casket before—now they knew they’d *never* know.

You could see it on both their faces; neither one liked it, but neither one could stop it. This wasn’t about who ran the streets anymore. Streets don’t pay like corridors do, and corridors all have security badges and quarterly reports.

The suits headed to a side room to “finalize documents.”

Vic and Carmine stayed put, staring at the closed casket, each man wondering how he’d gotten here and what “here” even meant anymore.

Finally, Carmine broke the silence. “Guess the family business ain’t the family business anymore. Eh, Vic?”

Vic nodded slowly, eyes still on the bronze lid. “Family’s gone, Carmine. All that’s left is the invoice.”

Bocelli’s voice swelled in the background. The lamb carving station clinked with silver. And the casket, locked and shiny, kept its secret, like it was laughing at both of them.

LATE OF LUDLOW STREET

His old place was on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side. Things had changed quite a bit since he'd left, but there were familiar signs that things hadn't changed much at all.

He didn't know why he had returned—not really. Just that something in the marrow of his bones told him he had to. Then, just as he arrived at the entrance of the old tenement, it dawned on him why: he had forgotten to forward his mail from his former address and figured it was probably time he came back to pick it up.

His name was Isaac or Isaiah. He couldn't remember which. He was in his early forties, tall but stooped slightly—not from age but from the cumulative weight of forgotten burdens. His face bore the look of a man who was once sharply handsome but whose features had been worn smooth by years of small regrets.

His hands trembled in his coat pockets as he approached the building on Ludlow Street. He had no key. He could barely remember if he ever had one. But he knew the mailbox was still there. His name

—beginning with I—etched into brass or maybe scrawled in fading Sharpie. The mail he'd come to retrieve would remind him who he was.

Inside, the lobby was a ruinous waiting room from a forgotten era. Upholstered chairs slumped under the weight of years with the occasional derelict sprawled, reading *The New Yorker* from a decade earlier. A single fluorescent bulb flickered above. The air smelled of wet plaster, boiled cabbage, and something unidentifiable but deeply municipal.

And there, guarding the hallway like Cerberus in a windbreaker, stood Dan.

"Where do you think you're going?"

The man who couldn't remember his name blinked. "Oh. Sorry to intrude on your afternoon. Let me introduce myself." He went silent, searching his mind frantically.

"Yes? Are you lost?"

"I moved out a while ago—used to live here. 4th floor. And I don't know how it happened, but I never left a forwarding address."

"You used to live here?"

"It's been a while."

"What's your name?"

"This is going to sound—I don't know. I'm having a tough time remembering it. I mean, it'll come to me. I've just been walking all day, and the sun gets to you. Anyway, I believe ... my name starts with an I if that helps."

Dan folded his arms across his chest. "That's specific. Got ID, Mr. I?"

"Yeah, no, that's why I'm here. I believe my ID—all of my information is ..."

"In the mail that you never forwarded."

"Exactly."

Dan narrowed his eyes.

The man who couldn't remember his name paused. "Isaac! My father's name was Isaiah. We're getting somewhere now. Suppose you let me go upstairs. They used to leave the mail by the door."

"Look, Isaac, son of Isaiah, I've lived here forever. I don't remember you. Besides, no one leaves mail by the door. Mail is put into mailboxes."

"You weren't here when I lived here."

"Well, I'm here now."

"Are you the building manager?"

"No, I'm the *acting* building manager. Name is Dan. 'Dan, the *acting* building manager.' I volunteer to manage in an unofficial capacity. Understand? That means I'm the one to talk to. There's no front desk clerk, concierge, or superintendent—we all pitch in. But I'm the one the tenants come to in an emergency. Because I'm responsible. I'm on the weekend neighborhood watch. I had a new security system put in. I'm in constant contact with the police. That's why I can't let just anyone in here."

"Well, Dan, do I look dangerous?"

"There's something about you that comes across as dangerous, yeah."

"It just came to me, I remember there was a buzzer that used to stick on the second floor. Right? Everyone used to complain about it. They used to complain about that, and the guy with the parrot in 3C, I think. You've heard the parrot squawking at all hours, haven't you?"

"There's no buzzer, there's no parrot. I remember people who live here. You? I don't remember."

"This is Ludlow Street, right?"

"Yeah. Ludlow. You would know that if you used to live here."

A laugh burst from the corner of the room. Isaac turned.

There, perched on one of the slumping chairs, was a figure dressed in a moth-eaten sport coat and loafers with no socks. His hair was slicked back in a style two decades too late, and his eyes glimmered with wild amusement.

"The picture of a man lost, alone, and forgotten," the man said in a crisp, uncanny Rod Serling impression, *"He arrives as a stranger, certain he belongs. But time, as it always does, has moved on... and taken the mailman with it."*

Isaac stared. "Who the hell is that?"

Dan sighed. "Him? That's Joey. He does impersonations. He's been on a Rod Serling kick of late. Don't mind him. He's a character."

Joey then lit a cigarette and continued. *"Imagine, if you will, a mailbox so deep it echoes—a chasm lined with regrets, overdue notices, and the occasional cry for help—stamped first class."*

Isaac grimaced. "I don't mean to inconvenience anyone. I need to retrieve my mail."

"Nope," said Dan flatly. "That's not gonna happen. I could get in trouble with the law if I went through the mail unauthorized. So, I can't help you. Besides, if mail sits idle, it's returned to sender."

"All of the mail?"

"Well, when did you move out?"

"It must have been ...ten years ago, maybe."

"*Ten years ago!* And you expect your back mail to be here still?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Joey stood, blew a plume of smoke, and slowly approached. "*The stranger pleads his case to the gatekeeper, but a decade or more has passed and the gatekeeper holds firm. Perhaps behind that door lies truth. Or perhaps... only junk mail and reminders of a life unpaid.*"

"You know, you could really get on someone's nerves with that! I need to look for my mail! That's all!" Issac barked, eyes widening.

Dan stepped between them. "That's enough. You got no ID, no key, and no proof you ever lived here."

Issac swallowed hard. "Wait—I just remembered. My mother. She lives on the first floor. Apartment 1B."

Dan tilted his head. "You *just* remembered? How would you *just* remember something like that?"

Dan turned to Joey, "He *just* remembered his *mother* lives here!"

"I—yeah ... she's ... she's elderly. She's hard of hearing. German Jewish woman, you know. She escaped the Nazis to come here. She's lived in that apartment since before I was born."

"*She escaped the Nazis?*"

"Yeah, people did that, you know!"

"When was that, like, *70 years ago?*"

"Maybe more."

"And you expect her to be *still* living here?"

"Why wouldn't she? She would have written to me if she had died."

“How could she have written to you if she were dead?”

“I mean *BEFORE* she died.”

“Before she died, she could have written to you that she was *about* to die. But you would never have received the letter, since you didn’t have your mail forwarded. *Am I right about that?*”

“Yes, you’re probably right about that, Dan! Could we check all the same? She was alive when I moved out. I remember the cabbage soup she made that afternoon!”

Dan shook his head slowly. “Fine, Mr. No-name! One knock. If she doesn’t answer, you’re out. Which apartment is it again?”

“1B. You can smell the cabbage soup from here.”

The three of them—Isaac, Dan, and Joey—moved slowly down the hall, footsteps echoing. They stopped before 1B. Isaac lifted his hand to knock. Dan pushed him aside and pounded on the door.

“Mrs.Whatever-your-name-is! You got a visitor!”

Silence.

“*Ma’, it’s your son! Open up!*” Isaac bellowed. “She’s hard of hearing,” he said to Dan. “Try again.”

Dan knocked louder.

Joey clasped his hands like a funeral director. “*Some men leave home. Others are erased by it. He came in search of a dead letter with no forwarding address; what he found was his soul without a postmark.*”

“*MA’! OPEN UP! It’s me! Isaac!*”

“Come on, let’s go,” Dan implored.

Isaac turned to the door, placing a hand on the wood. “*No, please! She’s in there.* She must be. Maybe she’s asleep. She might have my mail. She used to keep things for me!”

Dan pointed. *"Out!"*

"Schwartz! I remember now. My name is Isaac Schwartz! My mother's name is Ida Schwartz! She lives here! You have to believe me!"

"There's no one by that name living in this building. You'll have to leave, or I'll call the police."

Isaac was marched back through the hall; Joey followed, whispering dramatically, *"In a world where time wobbles, cabbage soup goes unheated, and mothers are so hard of hearing, they answer only in dreams, every window casts the wrong reflection, every doorknob tells a different riddle. Home isn't a place; it's a mirage."*

"How would you like a signpost up ahead rammed down your fucking throat, Mr. Twilight Zone?"

Outside, the air had grown colder. The city roared obliviously around him. Isaac stood on the curb, unsure what to do next. Joey remained behind him like a shadow with a stage voice.

"Portrait of Isaac Schwartz, a man denied. A life postponed. All for a key he doesn't possess... and a mailbox full of ghosts."

"Fuck off!" Isaac said as he took off down Ludlow. He didn't look back.

Isaac wandered the streets like a man sleepwalking through his own obituary. The buildings loomed overhead like stone-faced judges, their windows blank and unblinking. He turned down Broome, then Essex, then back again, always circling Ludlow as if orbiting the epicenter of a trauma he couldn't name.

Then he saw him.

A postman.

Blue uniform. Cap low. Wheeling a squeaky mail cart overflowing with envelopes and unspoken verdicts.

"Hey!" Isaac shouted, stumbling forward.

The postman didn't stop. He turned the corner onto Rivington like a figment vanishing into a dream.

Isaac followed. *"Hey! Hey, wait!"*

He turned onto Rivington—but the postman was already halfway up Clinton, then somehow across Delancey. The cart's wheels clacked like typewriter keys. Isaac's lungs burned, and his legs stiffened, but he couldn't catch up.

He cut through a narrow alley behind what used to be a butcher shop. Once, long ago, he'd stolen a pickle from a barrel there and been chased with a meat cleaver. The smell of sawdust and brine returned in a flash, as did the memory of his first kiss in the alley behind Bernstein's Books, where the girl had tasted like bubble gum and library dust.

Isaac passed a boarded-up storefront that had once been his father's favorite deli—"Herschel's Fine Cuts." He could still hear his father complaining about the prices, even though the pastrami was free.

On Orchard Street, he nearly lost the postman again. But just as the figure turned toward the Williamsburg Bridge and was about to vanish, a different sound stopped Isaac cold—a low mechanical hum.

A mail truck pulled up beside him.

It idled like a beast catching its breath. A postman leaned out, cigarette in one hand, elbow on the door frame. He had eyes like smoked glass and a voice like dry felt.

"I'm looking for Isaac Schwartz!"

"I'm Isaac Schwartz!"

“Oh yeah? ‘The’ Isaac Schwartz? Used to play stickball with my little brother Morris?” he said.

Isaac nodded, panting. “Stoopball.”

“Stoopball. Morris Feldman.”

“Yeah, I remember Morris.”

“He died. Couple’a years back. Yeah.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

The postman looked away as if to remember, then quickly looked back.

“Could be I got somethin’ for you, Isaac,” the postman said. “Hop in.”

Isaac didn’t argue. The cabin smelled of ink, engine grease, and, unmistakably, boiled cabbage. Isaac and the postman exchanged looks.

“Where you been all these years?”

“I couldn’t tell you if I tried.”

“That bad, hah? The old neighborhood. Right? I remember your father, Isaiah. Had the haberdashery over on Rivington, right? That was your father.”

“Isaiah, yes,” Isaac said breathlessly.

“How is it to be back? You see what these rich bastards did to our neighborhood? It’s hardly recognizable!”

“It’s happening all over.”

“It’s Looney Tunes, is what it is. Morris—he spoke good about you. He always liked you.”

“He was a good kid. Morris.”

“He was a bookmaker, just so you know. Started off to make ends meet and then he went a little wild. Went to Vegas. Got in with the wrong crowd. Went into debt. And they killed him.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah. *Debt!* When we was kids, you could always work off your debt. But now ... they don’t wanna hear it. Anyway ...” The postman reached behind his seat and produced a small bundle of yellowed, slightly curled envelopes. He handed them over solemnly.

“Where’d you get these?” Isaac asked.

“Dead letter bin. Comes around now and again, like old curses. You were gone, so I figured I’d keep them for you.”

Isaac turned them over. His name, *Isaac Schwartz*, was scrawled in his mother’s handwriting.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Don’t mention it. You treated my brother right; I treat you right. Someone’s gotta uphold the golden rule, no? These bastards—they’ll walk all over you if you let ‘em.”

His fingers trembled as he opened the first envelope.

My dear Isaac,

You left in such a hurry. I don’t know why. You didn’t say goodbye, not properly. But I understand. Things got heavy. I’ve lived long enough to know the weight people carry when they disappear.

Your father’s papers arrived yesterday—immigration, debt notices, something from the VA. I don’t know what it all means. I wish you’d call. Or write. I made cabbage soup. It’s in the freezer for you.

LATE OF LUDLOW STREET

*I miss you terribly.
Love, Ma.*

Isaac pressed the paper to his chest. His mother's words were like a match struck in the fog. Tears began streaming down Isaac's face. He doubled over.

"You all right there, Isaac?" the postman asked, taking his eyes off the road. "Wanna hug or somethin'?"

"No, keep your eyes on the road, please!"

"Don't be falling apart on me."

Isaac nodded, took a breath, then opened the second letter.

Mr. Schwartz,

We regret to inform you that your claim for remission under Section 37B has been denied due to incomplete records and unverified residency. Your father's estate balance, including outstanding debts from 1963 through 1987, has been transferred to your name.

Due to a clerical backlog, this notice is retroactively enforced as of ten years ago. Immediate appearance is required at the originating address of record—Ludlow Street—pending administrative closure.

Failure to comply may result in asset forfeiture and memory retention penalties.

Sincerely,

New York Municipal Debt Reconciliation Department

Isaac looked up, pale. "*This can't be real.*"

The postman smirked. "Oh, it's real enough."

“What the hell is this? What do they mean, 'memory retention penalties'?”

The postman flicked his cigarette out the window.

“Ludlow Street used to have a jail; most of the inmates were debtors imprisoned by their creditors, right on the corner of Broome. They say the basement’s still there. Buried under time. People owed too much; they went in. Didn’t always come back out.”

Isaac’s throat tightened.

“Why do I have to bear my father’s burden?”

The postman shifted into gear. “It’s the debt you pay. You return to make good. Back to your tenement. Make things right.”

Isaac frowned. “Make what right?”

The postman shrugged. “We Jews call it ‘*make teshuva*’—unburden yourself from whatever brought back here. Then return to the pure soul you were born with.”

The mail truck dropped Isaac off with a hiss of hydraulics. The postman gave him a small, two-fingered salute and drove off without another word.

Isaac stood before the tenement once more.

It was darker now, though the streetlamps flickered on in quiet protest. The building looked taller somehow, its windows more numerous, like eyes that had multiplied to keep better watch. The brass doorknob felt warmer this time, like someone had been waiting behind it.

He pushed it open.

Inside, the lobby was quiet. No derelicts. No decaying chairs. Just Joey, sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by envelopes.

"I see you've read all my mail," Isaac muttered.

Joey lit a cigarette, creased his lips, and stared directly ahead.

Isaac stepped over the threshold into the hallway. He felt it immediately—something weighty and slow pressing on his chest. Like humidity. Or guilt.

From the stairwell above came the sound of something dragging. Isaac turned. Dan was standing at the top of the first flight. Still in his windbreaker. Still with that bland, officious expression.

"Back so soon, Mr. I?" he said.

"I need to settle something."

Dan nodded once. "I'll show you the way."

He stepped aside, revealing a narrow staircase that hadn't existed before, twisting up like an intestinal memory. Dimly lit. No railing. Just brass nameplates nailed into each riser, one after another.

G. Schwartz

I. Schwartz

L. Schwartz

Return to Sender

Return to Sender

Return to Sender

Isaac climbed, one step at a time, past names he didn't recognize and ones that rang faint bells in forgotten rooms. At the top was a simple door labeled: Administrative Closure Office.

He knocked.

It opened immediately, revealing a room that looked like a DMV designed by M.C. Escher. Desks on the ceiling, clocks spinning backward, clerks typing on invisible keyboards.

A woman looked up from behind an enormous stack of manila folders. Her glasses were cracked; her lipstick was administrative red.

"Isaac Schwartz?"

He nodded.

"Please sign here." She handed him a clipboard. It was blank.

"What am I signing?"

"Receipt of consequences."

He signed.

She handed him a single envelope.

FINAL NOTICE

Stamped in red.

He opened it.

Inside was a single sentence: "You are now free to remember."

Isaac blinked.

The lights flickered. Somewhere in the bowels of the building, a typewriter dinged.

The buzz of a stuck service bell on the second floor. The squawk of the parrot in 3C, shrill and indignant: "*You again?*"

Memory cracks open like an old mailbox forced with a kitchen knife.

His mother, humming off-key in the kitchen, wielding a ladle like a conductor's baton. The rhythmic thump of cabbage hitting the pot.

Stoopball with Morris, the corner bully-philosopher who quoted Aristotle between pitches. A sharp throw, a sharper insult, and always the same call: *"Do-over!"*

Lillian, red curls and a chipped tooth, who once gave him a marble for his birthday and a black eye the same afternoon. Years later, behind Bernstein's Books, she would kiss him like it was a dare—and disappear the next week without a word.

His father's laugh—deep, brief, and used sparingly, like a precious spice. Usually, while reading overdue bills aloud as if they were comedy.

The smell of soup. Always the soup. Eternal, boiling, fragrant with regret.

And then—the postman. *"Some people you gotta hear from, even if they don't write. It's Looney Tunes, is what it is."*

The memory hits him like a wave. Isaac steadies himself on the banister, eyes wide. *"I lived here."*

He was back in the lobby. Dan stood beside him, holding out a steaming bowl.

"Cabbage soup," he said. "Your mother's recipe. Found it upstairs. Between the records of your delinquent taxes and your bar mitzvah photos."

Isaac took the bowl. Sniffed.

"Smells... right."

Dan clapped him on the back. "Congratulations. You've achieved bureaucratic redemption. Mazel tov."

"What now?"

Joey took another hit from his cigarette and stepped forward into the spotlight. *"In a building where memory accrues interest and guilt is paid*

in installments, one man has retrieved his mail—and maybe a piece of himself. His name is Isaac Schwartz, late of Ludlow Street, recently reinstated in the Book of the Remembered. Whether he stays or goes is his choice now. The debt is settled. The soup is warm. And the mailbox... is finally empty.”

Isaac smirked. Then sat on the lobby floor and spooned the soup into his mouth.

CITY OF RECKONINGS

CONFRONTATION AND CONSEQUENCE

“Yet, as only New Yorkers know, if you can get through the twilight, you’ll live through the night.”

— **Dorothy Parker**

MISS VAN DER LINDEN'S VALENTINE

6:42 AM: Greta Van der Linden wakes to the sound of Thelonious Monk's "*Don't Blame Me*" coiling up from one floor below her.

Frederick never wakes this early. The music suggests that someone else is present.

Greta stretches, silk sheets cold against her bare legs. Outside, the February wind howls down Beekman Place, rattling against the generous windows of her brownstone apartment.

She closes her eyes and listens. No voices. No laughter. Just Monk's piano. But that means nothing.

She rolls onto her side, willing herself back to sleep.

Today is Valentine's Day.

7:30 AM: She lights the stove for coffee, still listening for any movement from below.

On the counter, a teacup from Limoges—white, delicate, rimmed in gold. A crack snakes down one side.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

She could swear she could hear laughter as she runs her thumb over the hairline fracture.

8:23 AM: In the lobby, they pass one another. He is stepping out alone, fastening his coat, that damn smirk already on his lips.

"Miss Van der Linden," he murmurs, the mock formality curling around her name like smoke.

She tilts her head. "Frederick."

He does not stop walking and does not turn back. Just disappears out the door and into the city, leaving her standing there, hands tightening around her leather gloves.

Once, he would have kissed her cheek in greeting. Once, he would have brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face, whispering things he never meant.

That was before. Before the doubts, before the nights she lay awake listening to him entertaining someone else. Before she convinced herself she could live with the uncertainty.

Before she knew what he truly was.

9:07 AM: The wind hits her full in the face the moment she steps out. Her coat flaps open—she wrestles it shut with both gloved hands.

At the corner bus stop, the shelter offers no real protection. She stands stiffly. Her heels ache against the pavement. A smear of red lipstick stains her glove. She doesn't know how it got there.

9:15 AM: She boards the bus and sits near the back, where the city blurs behind glass. Her reflection stares back at her—wind-tossed, tired, strangely beautiful.

She looks like a woman someone might love. Or ruin.

MISS VAN DER LINDEN'S VALENTINE

The city slips by in streaks of gray and neon, dissolving into memory. That afternoon with Frederick.

He opened the door before she knocked as if he'd been waiting. Music played. Monk. She had brought a book to return, a flimsy pretext. He took it, tossed it aside, and offered her a drink.

"No ice," she'd said. Her voice steady, maybe too steady.

They sat by the fire. She laughed—at what, she cannot remember. Something clever he said. He was always clever.

Then he touched her.

The rest of it came fast, then slow—a kind of falling.

11:32 AM: Mr. Obermann emerges from his office, grinning. "Miss Van der Linden," he says, sing-song. He holds an envelope in one hand and something else in the other—a small red box tied with gold string.

"A little Valentine's for your fine temp work."

She takes it without flinching. It's cheap—the kind you find at Woolworth's, piled in discount bins. Greta forces a small, perfect smile. Mr. Obermann lingers, eyes crawling just a little too long across her neckline.

Out on the street, the wind slaps her face again. She drops the box of chocolates into the first trash bin she passes.

3:17 PM: The tenant meeting is a tedious affair. The building is old and elegant, but it is crumbling at its edges.

The grand, sweeping, polished oak staircase has begun to loosen, and the railing wobbles under a firm grip.

Mrs. Leland from 2A complains, her voice reedy and anxious. "It's a hazard. Someone's going to get hurt."

THE CITY BETWEEN US

Frederick, lounging in a chair, exhales cigarette smoke and shrugs.
"Then don't lean so hard."

A chuckle ripples through the room. Not everyone laughs.

Greta does not.

She studies him. The carelessness. The indifference. The way he dismisses real concerns because none of this touches him. He is untouchable. Unconcerned with the consequences of his actions.

A thought stirs in her mind. Quiet. Seductive.

What if he wasn't untouchable?

5:02 PM: The doorman, Albie, knows better than to smile first. With women like Greta, you wait for permission. "Good evening, Miss Van der Linden," he says, voice hushed like church.

"Was there anything for me today?" she asks, tone clipped but courteous.

Albie hesitates. Knows what she's expecting. A card. Cream-colored. With Frederick's unmistakable scrawl.

He swallows. "No, Miss Van der Linden. Not today."

She doesn't blink. Doesn't sigh. "Ah," she says.

5:04 PM: The stairs creak beneath Greta as she climbs each step deliberately—her gloved hand trailing the banister.

She wasn't expecting anything. Not really. She tells herself this as if reason could temper the fire kindling in her ribcage.

And *yet*.

But *how dare* Frederick not remember her?

She reaches her landing, her breath more jagged than she'd like. She unlocks her door, enters, and lets the dark swallow her.

MISS VAN DER LINDEN'S VALENTINE

5:42 PM: Suddenly. Unexpectedly. An envelope. Slipped under the door like a secret.

She freezes. For a breath. Two. Then swings open the door. The hallway is silent, not a footstep coming or going—only the faint hum of the radiator and the far-off rumble of a delivery truck outside.

Greta bends slowly, gloved fingers trembling now, though she wills them still. She lifts the envelope. The handwriting is unmistakable. That *F*, all flourish and contempt.

Her pulse drums in her ears. It's absurd, really, how something so simple—paper, ink, implication—can make her blood feel like fire.

She steps inside her apartment, locking the door behind her with practiced finality. Her heels echo across the parquet like gunshots.

She places the envelope on the kitchen table.

Just places it there. Walks away.

Then back. Then away again.

She can't open it. Not yet. Not while her hands are still shaking.

He's playing again. This is what he does. He disappears and reappears, always with perfect timing.

She hates him. Despises him.

It's another strategic move in a game she thought might be finished. But he's not done, is he?

Not Frederick.

She rips the envelope open.

Inside: a card. Cream. Embossed.

Happy Valentine's, darling.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

No name. No sentiment. No apology.

Just an address. The St. Regis. 9:00 PM.

She stares at it, her breath shallow.

What is this? A reconciliation? A trap?

She presses the card to her lips—not in affection, but to silence the scream crawling up her throat.

He's good at this, she thinks.

God, he's good.

8:58 PM: She glides through the halls of the St. Regis like a ghost in silk. The carpet hushes her steps, but she doesn't need silence. She brings her own.

Crystal chandeliers shimmer overhead, heavy with history.

Light drips from them like molasses, catching in the mirrors, where other women glance and turn away.

She doesn't slow.

Men turn.

Women murmur.

Someone whispers her name.

She doesn't flinch.

Then, she sees him.

Frederick.

Perched at the bar, a half-empty glass of Lagavulin in one hand, laughter blooming from his mouth like cigarette smoke—slow, luxurious, practiced.

MISS VAN DER LINDEN'S VALENTINE

And beside him—*her*.

Red lips.

Gardenia perfume.

A dress just tight enough to be deliberate.

The one Greta had seen once before, exiting 4B in the gray hour of morning.

The woman who was never supposed to matter.

And yet, there she is.

The two of them together. Laughing.

Greta orders a gimlet because it's the only thing she can say aloud without her voice cracking.

The bartender nods, indifferent.

The glass lands before her with a soft clink.

Her hand does not tremble. Not outwardly. But inside—*inside*, there is a violent splintering.

A chandelier crashing in slow motion.

Shame. Rage. Desire. Humiliation.

It isn't only the sight of Frederick that guts her—it's the realization that this was *planned*. That he *meant* for her to see.

The gimlet is bracing. Like cold water on a burn.

Frederick leans towards the woman in the red dress, whispering something that makes the woman's mouth bloom into a smirk.

She knows what she is to him now.

Something picked up once, briefly admired, and then set down again.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

And yet—there's a clarity in this. A final confirmation of his cruelty.

She sets the drink down. The stem of the glass glows faintly under the barlight, trembling just slightly now that she's not holding it.

She turns. Glides back through the halls of the St. Regis.

Leaving no mark behind her but the quiet echo of a woman who will not be played again.

Not like this.

10:12 PM: Beekman Place. The city hums beyond, but here, the hush is thick and waiting.

Greta climbs the front steps slowly.

She pauses at her door.

Looks up.

One light burns in 4B. Yellow. Insistent.

She opens her own door. Unbuttons her coat. Places it on the hook with careful fingers.

Pours a whiskey. No ice. No hesitation.

The card lies on the mantel, exactly where she left it.

She picks it up, holds it over the fire. Watches it curl into itself, gold embossing blistering, edges darkening, turning to smoke.

The ache in her chest sharpens—then cools.

11:47 PM: The stairwell breathes around her—old, dry air and varnish. Greta descends like a question mark, each step deliberate.

The banister glows faintly in the moonlight.

MISS VAN DER LINDEN'S VALENTINE

She touches it. Cold and slick.

She kneels. Opens her purse.

From inside: a screwdriver. Small. Clean. Familiar.

She works quickly. Quietly. A turn. A twist. A loosened bracket.

Not enough to snap now. Just enough to wait.

She wipes the brass with a handkerchief.

Replaces the tool. Rises.

It will hold for now.

It always does—until it doesn't.

12:06 AM: The key jangles in the lock. Laughter.

Frederick. And his Valentine.

Their voices are blurred—drunk, maybe. Pleased with themselves.
Full of their own story.

The footsteps begin their descent.

One pair fast. The other slower.

Then—the rhythm falters.

A hollow snap.

A sharp, splintering crack.

A gasp. A scream, bright and animal.

Then nothing.

Just wind, slipping through the cracks in the window.

12:09 AM: Greta Van der Linden stands by the window, drink in hand, her reflection pale in the glass.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

Outside, the city stretches dark and glittering, its promises flickering in the night.

Did it happen?

Did she only imagine it?

Will they find one body or two?

Preferably sprawled head to foot.

She does not check the stairs.

She simply sips her whiskey.

She lets the silence wrap around her like a shawl.

Outside, a siren starts in the distance.

But inside, only the wind speaks.

It howls through Beekman Place as a lover scorned.

And Greta listens.

BULLET TO THE HEAD

Hop Sing's All-Night Dumpling House existed in a seam between worlds. A pocket universe where steam from pork buns lacquered the windows into perpetual dusk and the clatter of mahjong tiles in the back room ticked like a celestial clock. After two a.m., lives didn't just lean the wrong way here—they quietly fractured beyond repair.

At a quarter past two, Eddie Cardone, wearing the leather jacket he wore like a second skin, decided to make his move.

He didn't get far.

Before one foot slid from the red leather booth—where soy sauce turned every elbow into flypaper—Jimmy Tong set a hand to Eddie's chest and said, "Don't."

Eddie wore his smirk like a paper shield. "Don't what?"

Jimmy's eyes—dark, liquid, the eyes of a man with a ledger for a soul—ticked toward the bar. "Her."

Lillianne Wong. Jet-black bob cut to a geometry teacher's standard; high, decisive cheekbones; almond eyes that read receipts from the

heart. She looked less like a person than an idea: a lost punk LP shelved in a philosopher's library. She traced the rim of her glass, not summoning the devil so much as tuning a radio to a frequency only she could hear.

"It's like I know her," Eddie muttered to himself loud enough for Jimmy to hear.

"Everyone knows someone like her."

"No, not like that. Something else," he said. "She got a boyfriend?"

"Had." Jimmy's mouth thinned. "Tommy Huang."

"The Tommy Huang?"

The look Jimmy gave him could've bricked a window. Yeah. That Tommy. Mott Street kingpin.

"So she's single," Eddie said, proving there are kinds of bravery that don't deserve applause.

The overhead fan groaned. A fly banged the neon. Jimmy rubbed his forehead like the migraine of babysitting Eddie had gone terminal. "You're outta your league. You're just another uptown white boy with 'Yellow Fever' and no exit strategy. You work for me; that ain't a passport."

"What's it gonna take then?"

Jimmy leaned in. "That woman, for your information, is Lillianne Wong. Ring a bell? You might remember she almost got herself killed last summer."

"What?"

"It was all over the papers. She took a bullet to the head for Tommy."

"A bullet to the head?"

“That’s right. One of Tommy’s own men farmed a hit out to an amateur. Some people think it might have even been her.”

“She put out a hit on her own boyfriend?”

“Whether she did or she didn’t, the bullet meant for Tommy ricocheted and hit her. She bled out but survived. The bullet, however, is still in there.”

Eddie exhaled. “What’d you mean the bullet’s still in there?”

“She’s got a .35 caliber hollow point slug in her head. Forever. Doctors said pulling it would be like defusing a bomb. One sneeze and she’s wallpaper.”

The dumpling steamer hissed like a witness.

Eddie whistled, low. “So... no headbanging sex.”

Jimmy covered his face. “You didn’t just say that.”

Lillianne turned. A quick glance. It hit Eddie like wet static.

He smiled—already doomed. “How do I explain love at first sight to you?”

“Don’t bother,” Jimmy said. “You won’t live long enough.”

Eddie stood. The booth peeled off him like reluctant skin. The jukebox hiccupped. Hop Sing’s held its breath to watch a man volunteer for his own undoing.

At the bar, Lillianne twirled her straw like a general choosing which country to burn.

Eddie slid in beside her. “Need some company? I’m Eddie Cardone. Columbus Avenue. Friend of Jimmy’s.”

Without looking: “I’m not interested.”

“Jimmy told me not to come over, too. But I couldn’t pass up the chance to meet the most beautiful—”

“Did you hear me the first time?”

He lowered his voice. “I know you. From somewhere.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s not anywhere specific. You know when you get that feeling, like, there’s something familiar ...” Eddie trailed off, realizing he wasn’t getting anywhere. Then: “Listen, I know you’ve been through a rough spell of late.”

Lillianne smirked. “Rough spell?”

“Jimmy filled me in. Said you caught a bullet.”

“People catch bullets every day. Some of them stay dead. So what?” She took a slow sip, eyes on the mirror behind the bottles.

“You’re brave, is all.”

“I was in a coma for a month. What’s so brave? Woke up, couldn’t remember my own name. Relearned the alphabet. How to use chopsticks. You want a trophy for noticing I’m still breathing?” She set the glass down. “So yeah, rough spell. Anything else?”

“If you were with me, nothing like that would ever happen again.”

“It’s already happened. The bullet’s still in there.” She tapped her skull lightly. “One wrong move and poof. That isn’t romantic.”

“Then I’ll be the gentlest man in New York. Ask Jimmy. I once robbed a guy and zipped his jacket after.”

Eddie looked at the mirror behind the bar and caught a glimpse of someone standing behind him, but when he turned, no one was there. Lillianne spoke, “Maybe you do know me from somewhere, but not in this world.”

Eddie ran his hand over his mouth, then let it rest on his chin. “Why don’t you let me buy you a drink, Lillianne?”

He spoke her name, and she melted a little.

“*Stunod*,” she said, with a laugh—dragging the word across marble, Mulberry Street bite intact. “*Stunod Italiano*.”

Eddie blinked. “So, you know a thing or two.”

“More than that.”

“I don’t run with punks from Mulberry Street if that’s what you’re used to. I’m from Uptown.”

“You said.”

“We have a little more class.”

She sniffed the air. “I can smell it. Soft-boy swagger: nothing to prove, everything to lose.”

“You’re not wrong. Still, I know how to treat a woman. A woman like you deserves the best.”

“You’re still *stunod*,” she added, softer now. “But not boring.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Not by me,” she said, then turned away, then back. “One drink, Eddie Cardone. Not because I like you. Because I like your jacket. I want to know how I’d look wearing it with nothing else.”

The smile Eddie made was the exact size of his doom. “Cue taken.”

Lillianne’s studio was situated above a shuttered seafood joint on Doyers Street. The hallway smelled like boiled crab—thick, permanent—as if the walls had been marinated in it since prohibition. She yanked Eddie in by the collar and kissed him like revenge with interest. When the door slammed, they were already half-naked.

“Don’t be gentle,” she said.

He tried not to be. Then her head thudded against the wall—hollow and small—and panic punched him. He cupped the back of her skull like it was blown glass.

She snarled, legs locking him in. “You stop now, I’ll kill you. I’ll die when I’m ready, and it won’t be from a pillow tap.”

Something in him snapped loose. She laughed, howled, and finally screamed, a sound that made the neighbor pound the wall.

When the room cooled, she pulled the sheet to her collarbone and stared at the ceiling. “Next time, don’t baby me so much.”

Eddie took it as a joke, but realized something bone-deep: he was in love with a woman who treated death like foreplay.

And he was all in.

The morning after, Eddie woke in bed alone. He went to the bedroom window and saw a shadow under a street light in the street below, looking up at him. The fog obscured everything but the outline of his leather jacket. A moment later, the shadow took off running.

Lillianne was in the kitchen, pouring coffee from a French press: silk robe, bare feet, tousled hair. Sexier than the night before, Eddie thought as he joined her.

“Did I tell you I used to work in a gallery?”

“No,” Eddie replied after a sip from a chipped cup.

“Cultural center, really. Diaspora art. Too much anger or not enough soul.” Crooked paintings leaned on every wall: ink and oil like a Chinatown alley mid-melt.

“You paint?” Eddie asked, eyes fixated on a painting of a hood in a leather jacket dangling from a fire escape.

“Used to. Before I was shot.”

They ate eggs over soft toast. “What’s your real story, Eddie? Uptown boy or a line you use to hunt trouble?”

“Columbus Avenue. Grew up over a deli. Ma worked nights. Dad split early. Want my report card?”

“I want to know why a white boy with soft hands is running rackets for Jimmy Tong.”

“I don’t run rackets.”

She smiled without turning. “Okay.”

He spotted a shape on the street. “Someone’s watching your window.”

“One of Tommy’s lookouts. They linger like ghosts.”

“Do you know who fired at Tommy that night?”

She poured herself a coffee. “No. I have a flash. A shadow. Not Chinese. White. Good-looking. Like you. You know *déjà vu*?”

“Sure.”

“What about *presque vu*?” She watched steam curl. “Almost-seen. The thing just out of reach.” She looked up. “Like something about Eddie Cardone.”

“You think I did it?”

“I’m not saying you did.” She stirred. “But there’s something familiar about you, too. When I came out of the coma, Doctors told me I’d have false memories.”

They let a siren wind down between them. He said he moved boxes, sometimes for Jimmy, small-time. She nodded as if accepting a verdict no one believed.

"You don't work for Jimmy anymore," she said. "You're mine. Full-time. Bodyguard."

He blinked. "Serious?"

"You survived last night. That's not an audition you walk away from. I want you near."

She took his hand and set it on her breast. "I see you. Hungry. Willing to do anything for me."

She slid his hand down below her waist. "What if it *were* you?" she added. "Tommy's would-be assassin, who couldn't shoot straight."

"It wasn't."

"No? Don't you think you could?" she asked, as she inserted his finger in her and kissed him with a heat that could leave a blister.

She pulled away without warning and wrapped the silk robe around her as if suddenly remembering an appointment. "There's an opening tomorrow night. New China Arts. Shanghai and Hong Kong businessmen with a fetish for 'gangland art.' They're hungry for anything that smells like Chinatown's underbelly."

She turned to face him again, but the softness from moments ago was tucked away. "And I want you there. By my side."

Her gaze lingered. "My Ex will be there. I may want to show you off."

"I thought you and Tommy were history."

"We are. I want to make sure history doesn't repeat."

She moved past him, trailing a hint of perfume and purpose. "Wear something decent," she said. "Not one of Jimmy's cheap suits."

"Sounds classy."

"It's a freak show. And I'm expected."

She finished her coffee and set the cup down with deliberate care, like placing the last piece on a chessboard. Eddie drank the rest of his. The bottom had gone bitter, all grit and sediment, but it still kicked.

Bayard Street; New China Arts; *Gangland Visions*. Shanghai money drifted through the space in Armani and Gucci, sniffing sophistication in curated menace. Tommy Huang held court, old money wrapped around older grudges. Later, Jimmy arrived with a grin that rearranged air molecules.

“Quite the collection,” Jimmy said to no one in particular, eyes sweeping over a canvas where severed hands fed themselves into a meat grinder. “Is this art or to keep certain people from sleeping too easily?”

Tommy Huang approached. His entourage peeled off with wordless precision, leaving only him and Jimmy face to face beneath a painting of a midnight alley in splashes of blood red.

“You’re late,” Tommy said, without warmth.

Jimmy looked around. “Traffic in the tunnel.”

Tommy didn’t smile. “You hiring from Jersey now, too? I hear your uptown boy had himself a good time last night.”

Jimmy licked his teeth. “Eddie’s his own man. And Lillianne’s more woman than most men can handle. As you know.”

Tommy studied him. “You keep inviting ghosts to Chinatown; eventually, they start thinking they’re ancestors.”

Jimmy laughed once, short, sharp. “And you keep hanging our dirty laundry on gallery walls, eventually someone’s gonna frame you in it.”

For a moment, silence. Tommy adjusted the cuff of his sleeve. "You know, back in the day, Chinese generals used to paint their battle scenes in blood. Not metaphor. Real blood. On silk. And then have palace guardians present them to the emperor as proof of loyalty."

Jimmy bowed his head slightly, mock-formal. "Then I'm just here to admire the brushstrokes."

Tommy leaned in, almost whispering. "Do that. And keep your crew from mistaking the art for open invitations." Tommy walked off and greeted another guest with a smile.

Jimmy remained at the painting, too still to sip his drink.

Just then, a staged knife fight broke out near the back wall—actors with butterfly knives and perfect footwork. The blood was paint; the applause real.

Tommy Huang stepped onto the small stage at the front of the gallery, his smile sharp enough to cut glass. The crowd fell silent, all eyes turning toward their host.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, his accented English heard throughout the space. "Welcome to New China Arts, where we celebrate the beautiful complexity of our heritage."

Tommy gestured toward the paintings surrounding them. "Chinese art has always possessed a delicate touch, yes? A reverence for the human soul that Western artists struggle to capture."

He paused, letting his words settle over the crowd like incense smoke.

"But we would be fools to ignore the violence that has shaped our community, that continues to shape it today. The blood spilled on these very streets is as much a part of our tradition as calligraphy or jade carving. Tonight, we honor that truth."

The crowd murmured its approval, fanning themselves with exhibition programs, unsure whether they were attending a cultural event or a confession.

"And now," Tommy continued, his voice dropping to a theatrical whisper, "we come to the evening's main event. A series of works by an anonymous artist, depicting an incident that changed my life forever."

At that moment, the gallery doors opened, and two figures stepped inside: Lillianne Wong, in an elegant black dress, and Eddie Cardone beside her.

The effect on the crowd was immediate. Conversations died mid-sentence. Every eye in the gallery turned toward the entrance, and the tension that had been simmering all evening suddenly threatened to boil over.

Lillianne was always stunning, but now her beauty carried the weight of tragedy. The bullet lodged in her skull had left no visible scar, but something in her eyes spoke of pain that went deeper than flesh and bone. She held her head high as she surveyed the room, meeting the stares with a quiet dignity that made some observers look away.

Eddie remained close to her side, his protective and ominous presence.

Tommy's smile never wavered, but his knuckles went white as he gripped the microphone. "Ah, and here is our guest of honor," he announced, his voice carrying across the suddenly silent gallery. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Lillianne Wong, who miraculously recovered from injuries sustained during the... incident... we are about to commemorate."

The applause was polite but strained, like the sound of breaking

glass wrapped in velvet. Lillianne nodded acknowledgment but said nothing, her silence more powerful than any speech could have been.

"The paintings you are about to see," Tommy continued, "are a depiction of that terrible night one year ago."

He gestured toward a series of covered canvases arranged along the far wall. Gallery assistants moved forward, their hands poised on the protective cloths.

"These works show us truth in its rawest form—the moment when a bullet intended for me instead found its target in the woman I loved, leaving her forever changed, forever marked."

The protective cloths fell away simultaneously, revealing six large paintings that seemed to pulse with their malevolent energy. The anonymous artist had painted the assassination attempt with photographic precision and nightmarish intensity. Each canvas captured a different moment of that terrible night—the muzzle flash, the bullet's trajectory, Lillianne's face contorting in pain, Tommy's expression of shock and rage.

But it was the final painting that drew every eye and held every breath. The assassin, partially hidden in shadow but clearly visible, bore an unmistakable resemblance to Eddie Cardone. The artist had captured something in the killer's stance, in the set of his shoulders and the way he held the gun, that made the identification inescapable.

The gallery fell into a silence so complete that the distant sounds of Chinatown traffic seemed to echo like thunder. Eddie's face remained impassive, though his eyes shifted towards Lillianne. Lillianne closed her eyes, as if the paintings had transported her back to that moment when her world exploded in pain and confusion.

Tommy stepped down from the stage, his eyes never leaving Eddie's

face. "Art has a way of revealing truth, doesn't it?" he said softly, his words clearly in the absolute quiet.

The crowd clapped nervously, formally. Lillianne didn't smile. Tommy met Lillianne's eyes. He moved toward Eddie.

"I'm Tommy Huang," he said, extending a hand.

"Eddie Cardone."

Tommy's eyes didn't blink. "Interesting likeness, don't you think?"

"It's not me," Eddie snapped, "I wasn't there!"

Jimmy Tong's eyes moved to Eddie. Then to Lillianne. "You see it too, don't you?"

"I see what someone *wants* me to see," Lillianne said. Her voice had dropped into a register colder than the fog outside.

"Lillianne," Eddie said carefully, "this is a setup. I wasn't there. I didn't even know you then."

Tommy Huang's smirk held. "But you're here now, and the past has a way of recognizing its own."

"I'll bid one million dollars for this painting," shouted one investor from Shanghai, breaking the silence.

Applause. Tommy's eyes glittered. "Looks like I'm about to become rich," he said smoothly.

The bids came fast and furious: one million, two, two and a half. Then, four million from a Hong Kong investor who needed to win at all costs.

Lillianne whispered something that didn't seem to pass through her throat: "*I painted these.*"

Tommy's expression cracked. Jimmy cocked his head. "You what?"

“When I came out of the coma, they told me I’d have false memories,” she said. “But that brushstroke... that’s mine.”

The crowd whispered *provenance* and *one of a kind*. Phones came out like additional eyes.

Then the real gunfire started.

Someone from the street fired rounds into the gallery, directly at the portrait of the assassin.

Eddie grabbed Lillianne and went down hard, shielding her skull with both hands. Glass shattered. Tommy’s men drew guns. One of them fell, clutching a thigh.

When the shooting stopped, the assassin’s painting wore fresh bullet holes. Tommy straightened his jacket and scanned the exits.

The room buckled into motion. A mass of silk and money rushed the doors—Bayard Street became a breached dam. Eddie fought the tide and saw a gunman slide from the shadows wearing a leather jacket that was all too familiar. The gunman then met Eddie’s eyes.

He was Eddie’s exact double.

Eddie drove for him, but the gunman got lost in the crowd and bolted for the door. Eddie reached back for Lillianne—caught her gaze for a single beat—before the crowd shouldered him into the rain.

Eddie tore down an alley in pursuit of his double.

For blocks, Eddie hunted, but he couldn’t find him; then a brick exploded inches from his ear and grit salted his teeth. Another shot chased him into the dark. Eddie crouched to protect himself.

Eddie was not chasing his double anymore; *his double was chasing him!*

BULLET TO THE HEAD

Eddie grabbed a ladder hanging from a fire escape and took two rungs at a time, crossed a rain-slick roof, before dropping behind a vent.

A sedan idled crooked at the curb. The window rolled down. Jimmy Tong leaned across from the passenger seat.

“Eddie!”

Eddie peered from the ledge of a building.

“Get down here! I’m getting you outta Chinatown now!”

Eddie’s double waited in the alley mouth, patient, gun raised.

Eddie saw him clearly from his rooftop perch.

Another man, who had assumed the guise of a guardian of an ancient Chinese palace, stood at the corner. He drew a gun and walked directly toward Eddie’s double, firing a bullet, a direct hit to the head.

The crack of the shot split the night. Pigeons tore from the eaves of surrounding tenements. Eddie’s double crumpled at the Guardian’s feet. Jimmy flinched from the driver’s seat of his car.

Eddie scampered down the fire escape like a hellcat, then swung his body weight off the last rung and onto the pavement. He slammed into a line of trash cans, then careened into Jimmy’s car door before getting in.

Inside, the windows fogged with breath and rain.

“Word’s out,” Jimmy said, wrenching the wheel onto Pell. His cigarette ash trembled in the draft. “Every punk with half a gun and a quarter brain thinks wasting you buys him a seat at Tommy’s table.”

Eddie scanned the sidewalks, heart rattling. “What the hell’s going on, Jimmy?”

Jimmy spat out the window. "You got a price on your head. That painting made you a bounty."

Eddie's jaw tightened. "*Did you get a look at the guy shooting at me?*"

Jimmy didn't answer.

Eddie pivoted in the seat, eyes drilling him. "*I just saw a guy who looked exactly like me eat a bullet, Jimmy! What the fuck is happening?*"

"Eddie, calm down." Jimmy leaned on the horn, muscled the car around a delivery van. "I'm gettin' you out. I told you she'd cost you. I told you to stay the fuck away from her."

"What does Lillianne have to do with this?" Eddie asked. He dragged air through his teeth. "Am I Tommy's would-be assassin, Jimmy? Did you give me that order? *Why am I not remembering any of this?*"

Jimmy's jaw worked like he was chewing glass. "Listen. Maybe you didn't pull the trigger. But the guy who did might be you!"

"*You're not making sense, Jimmy!*"

Jimmy's hand smacked the wheel. "You walked into Lillianne's life and tripped a switch. Now the mirror's cracked—you're seeing angles instead of lines. It ain't you—"

"—but it might as well be me," Eddie cut in.

A humorless chuckle leaked out of Jimmy. "Ever read *The Tao*, Eddie? Taoist stories are full of riddles that don't resolve, only circle back on themselves. A bullet is embedded in Lillianne's head, and yet she's alive—does that make sense? Everything from there scatters."

Eddie shook his head. "What's that again—the *Tao*?"

"*The Tao*' is the way the pieces talk to each other, whether you like it or not." Jimmy's voice roughened, quieter now. "Prophecy. Karma. Ghosts."

“Don’t gimme this Chinese fortune cookie bullshit, Jimmy!”

“I’m on your side, Eddie!”

Rain thickened outside, hammering neon into liquid streaks. Eddie looked away, jaw tight, pulse racing.

Jimmy’s voice softened, almost pitying. “It has everything to do with Lillianne! You think you chose her, but that ain’t how this works. You got caught. Love don’t make you a hero, Eddie—it makes you a target. And you painted the bullseye yourself.”

He stomped the brake. The light on Canal flared red, bleeding across the hood. For a heartbeat, the only sound was the tick of the light and the engine’s nervous rattle.

A sedan nosed up alongside, window cracked.

Jimmy’s eyes twitched. “Shit.”

POP. POP. POP.

Glass burst. Jimmy folded sideways, blood spraying the dashboard with static. The wheel spun. Eddie grabbed it, wrestled the car toward the curb.

“Jimmy!” He shook him once, but Jimmy was gone.

Another bullet snapped the mirror, blew a rear bulb into dust.

Eddie kicked open the car door and ran.

His shoes slapped rain-slick pavement. Behind him, footsteps kept a rhythm. He risked a glance and his stomach twisted—the gunman’s shoulders, his grin, even the rip on the jacket’s cuff—the exact shape of the man who’d died minutes ago.

Another double?

Eddie saw a laundry truck idling at the corner. He quickly ducked behind it to catch his breath. The sound of his pursuer’s footsteps

stopped. Eddie took time and listened. He caught his reflection in a rain-darkened storefront window: three versions of himself sprinting, falling, reaching for a woman he might already have lost.

Jimmy's last words rang in his head.

Prophecy.

Karma.

Ghosts.

Eddie wiped glass dust from his cheek with the back of his hand.



Jimmy was dead. The realization came over him. Eddie had watched the life bleed out of the only man who'd ever taught him the rules of Chinatown, the man who'd pulled him from Columbus Avenue street corner cons into better-paying hustles.

That left Eddie to run alone, without his closest ally, through streets that felt stranger with every step.

Another shot rang out behind him—close enough to make his ribs jump. Eddie took off again. He veered down a side street, tripped over a half-submerged curb, and landed face-first in a flooded gutter. For a long moment, he didn't move. Rainwater mixed with blood at the edge of his mouth. He blinked.

Red neon rippled across the puddle. Steam rose from a sidewalk grate.

He looked up.

Hop Sing's Dumpling House.

The glow of its red lanterns was precisely as he remembered from his

first night with Jimmy. Time hiccupped. Eddie staggered forward, the gun a leaden weight in his belt.

A man stood at the entrance, blocking the door.

The Guardian. The one who, only moments earlier, killed one of Eddie's doubles. He was dressed like he'd stepped from a Qing dynasty—long coat, high collar, eyes like chipped marble. Rain didn't seem to touch him.

"You start over again," the Guardian said, voice rough with age and accent.

Eddie's breath came hard. "Start what?"

Eddie felt a force field around the Guardian. Like standing too close to a live wire or leaning over the edge of a subway platform as a train tore past. His teeth buzzed in his skull, and a cold threaded through him.

Eddie staggered back a step, suddenly unsure if the street was level or if his own legs were betraying him. The rain seemed to fall more slowly. The neon bled in long, liquid streaks.

He edged sideways, eyes drawn toward the steamed window.

And there it was—himself, alive and dry and laughing in a booth with Jimmy Tong.

His heart slammed. He peered through the window again.

Inside, he saw himself seated with Jimmy in the booth, laughing like nothing had ever gone wrong. At the bar, Lillianne swirled her drink, oblivious to fate. Eddie watched himself stand, cross the floor, and lean in toward her.

The scene from that first night, perfect and impossible.

He stumbled back. "What the fuck is goin' on? *Jimmy's dead*. What the hell is this?"

The Guardian tilted his head, voice like a slow knife. “You start... over again.”

Eddie’s voice cracked. *“That’s me in there—how the hell is Jimmy alive?”*

The Guardian didn’t move. Didn’t blink. The rain ran off his coat without wetting him.

Something inside Eddie snapped—panic or rage, he couldn’t tell. He lowered his shoulder and charged, desperate for something solid in a night that kept dissolving.

The Guardian answered with impossible speed. His hand whipped inside his coat and came out with a short, curved blade that gleamed in the neon. Eddie barely jerked back in time; the edge sliced his sleeve open instead of his throat.

They grappled in the doorway, rain-slick steps treacherous underfoot. The Guardian’s strength was inhuman, a steady weight pressing him into the brick. The knife flashed between them, grazing Eddie’s collarbone.

The Guardian leaned close, eyes burning like chipped jade. “You cannot change who you are.”

The words rattled inside Eddie like loose bullets. Behind him, through Hop Sing’s steamed window, his other self raised a glass with Jimmy as if nothing in the world had broken.

The Guardian stepped back, blade steady, voice low.

“First drop... makes ripple. Ripple never stop.”

Eddie panted in the rain, knife trembling in his hand. The city tilted. A cold certainty slithered into his bones.

The Guardian closed the space between them, relentless again. “You

BULLET TO THE HEAD

must return to where the ripple began,” he said. His voice was final. “You start... over again.”

Eddie blinked. And then the world began to pull. Not literally. Not physically. But everything bent, subtly, like heat distortion over blacktop. The buildings rippled at the corners. The alley curled in on itself. Eddie’s vision narrowed like a camera lens.

His body didn’t resist.

The smell of five-spice and fried dumplings hit him. The booth creaked beneath him. Soy sauce stuck to his elbow. A laminated menu sat on the table, sticky with something ancient.

Jimmy Tong sat across from him, grinning, chopsticks in hand, slurping noodles like nothing had ever gone wrong.

“You good, Eddie?” Jimmy asked, mouth full.

Eddie stared at him. Open-mouthed. Barely breathing.

Jimmy Tong was dead. Eddie had watched the life bleed out of the only man who’d ever taught him the rules of Chinatown, the man who’d pulled him from Columbus Avenue street corner cons into better-paying hustles.

Now Jimmy was here. Alive. Eating noodles like the clock never broke.

A glass clinked at the bar.

Eddie turned his head.

Lillianne Wong sat at the bar, laughing at something the waiter said, her fingers circling the rim of her glass like a storm looking for a coast.

The same as before.

All of it: the same.

The air inside Hop Sing's was warm, but Eddie felt cold.

Outside, rain streaked the windows.

Inside, the cycle had begun anew.

But with a new twist.

Tommy Huang walked in and sat with Lillianne.

Jimmy Tong dabbed his mouth with a napkin and turned to Eddie.

"Bullet to the head. Drop the gun. Keep walking."

Jimmy's eyes shifted from Eddie to Tommy. And then back to Eddie.

"And don't fuck it up."

Bullet to the head. Drop the gun. Keep walking.

Eddie stared at Jimmy but couldn't form words to protest. It was already a quarter past two, and Eddie was fated to "start over again."

At the bar, Lillianne circled her glass with a metallic stirrer. The sound it made was like a coin running on the lip of a roulette wheel.

Eddie watched Tommy lean close, neon snowing silver in his hair. Lillianne laughed—a sound that split the room in half: invitation and indictment. It made Eddie wonder if he'd ever been real.

Eddie's pulse slowed until it felt like a clock running backward. The room held, waiting, as if the air itself wanted to see what version of him would emerge this time.

He wondered how many Eddies there had been. How many still waited, half-formed, in the fog. How many had kissed Lillianne in her Doyers Street apartment? How many had bled on Canal Street? How many had drawn the gun? How many had pulled the trigger?

He wondered if love could survive iteration, or if each confession was just an echo—different lips, same words. If every laugh from Lillianne's mouth was the same coin spun on the edge of the same

glass, if Tommy Huang's silver hair had caught the neon like this in ten thousand other nights, each one collapsing into the next.

Maybe the bullet never reached its mark. Maybe it always did. Maybe the ricochet was the point—the Taoist punchline of a joke told through gunpowder.

Mahjong tiles clattered in the back room, their rhythm neither chance nor destiny but some third thing Eddie couldn't name. Steam rose from the dumplings, curled, collapsed, and rose again. Outside, the fog clamped down on Chinatown until the streets had no end and no beginning.

Jimmy's voice cut through him—voice of the dead, voice of the living:

"And don't fuck it up."

Bullet to the head. Drop the gun. Keep walking.

Eddie felt the weight of it, a mantra and a curse. He thought of home, then stopped. Was there even such a place? Or had Columbus Avenue, the deli upstairs, the soft-boy swagger—been nothing more than filler, narrative spackle poured into the cracks of a man who didn't exist before the ricochet?

He remembered then. He remembered pulling the trigger. He remembered the ricochet. He remembered Lillianne's scream, her coma, her rebirth. He remembered Jimmy's blood. He remembered his own, over and over.

Why couldn't he remember more?

Not déjà vu. *Presque vu*, something almost-seen. Something just out of reach. Like something about Lillianne Wong.

At the bar, Lillianne laughed again, and the sound carved him in two. She circled her glass with a metallic stirrer.

What were real memories? What were the false ones?

Was it she who gave the order?

It's all over the papers, Jimmy had said that first night.

What if the ricochet was the only part that was true?

What if Lillianne *wanted* Tommy dead? Out of the million scenarios, that was the one thought that coiled in Eddie's head, cold and slick. What if she didn't just want him dead? What if she wanted to own the story of his death? To turn his blood into her paint. The grieving girlfriend of the Mott Street kingpin. It was a power move that was so audacious that it was almost beautiful. The ultimate piece of diaspora art: using the gangland's own violence to create something they could never understand, but would pay millions to own a piece of.

So she goes to Jimmy. Not a rival, but a pragmatist. A man who understands value. She offers him a cut of the art sales, a bigger piece of Chinatown once Tommy's gone—a partnership.

"Farm the hit out to an amateur," she'd say. *"Someone deniable. A tourist. A white boy from uptown with more swagger than sense. He'll be the perfect brushstroke."*

And Jimmy finds Eddie Cardone. Columbus Avenue. Hungry. The perfect patsy.

The plan was clean. The amateur fires, kills Tommy, gets lost in the chaos, or gets whacked himself. Lillianne is the grieving girlfriend. The art sells. She and Jimmy win.

But the plan had a flaw. The amateur's hand wasn't steady. The bullet didn't go where it was supposed to. It kissed a brick, a lamp-post, the fender of a parked car—and it found her. It found Lillianne.

And in that moment, the plan didn't die. It transformed. It became something else. Something mythic.

The bullet in her head wasn't a mistake anymore. It was her credential. It was the source of her *presque vu*—the 'almost-seen.' It made her an oracle. It gave her the ultimate cover. Who would ever suspect the victim was the architect?

She wakes from the coma. She relearns everything. And she starts to paint, not from memory, but from design. She paints the assassin. She paints him with a face.

Eddie.

"You're mine. Full-time. Bodyguard."

Of course. She needed him close. Not for protection. To control the narrative. To make sure the living, breathing suspect was always right there, next to the tragic victim, feeding the story and making it real.

These thoughts should have filled him with rage. Instead, a strange, cold calm settled over him.

Eddie smiled at Lillianne, already lost, already multiplied, already caught in the machinery of fate, each turn grinding him closer to dust.

What made him weak for a woman like Lillianne? And which came first, the woman or the weakness?

She smiled back, a ticking time bomb—one false move and it might all end.

One of Eddie's doubles might have thought he could end it and get out simply by killing her. Others were so tortured, they had no plan at all but to fire at paintings or stalk her under street lights in the fog.

There had to be something Eddie could do to change things. To get out. But the clatter of mahjong tiles in the back room sent a ripple through him, and the only thing that echoed in his head was:

THE CITY BETWEEN US

"You start over again."

THE CITY BETWEEN US

Their first date was at a bistro tucked between a shuttered jazz club and a tattoo parlor in Soho. The lights inside were low, and the air was stained with something vaguely illicit. The décor whispered of forgotten borderlands—French-Algerian perhaps, though no one asked too many questions.

Henry and Victoria sat at a shadowed booth near the back—half-hidden by a velvet curtain and the weight of things unsaid. They were two of Wall Street’s finest predators. They looked like lovers. Or spies. Or something in between.

“It’s as if time has stopped, don’t you think?” Henry mused, his eyes on the ice circling slowly in his drink.

“Or maybe it’s racing ahead,” she replied, her tone laced with that particular sadness the digital age couldn’t cure. “Too fast to catch.”

Their words hung in the air, delicate as perfume. Something passed between them then—a flicker, a fracture—like code breaking down just before a system crash.

Outside, the city howled in sub-zero key. Inside, the past and future flirted recklessly, as if they, too, had met here before.

Though their careers rarely collided, Henry and Victoria moved in the same polished orbits. One night, shoulder to shoulder on a crowded subway, Henry turned to her and said, "Dinner?"

She said yes.

"You know," Henry said as the waiter set down fresh cocktails, "sometimes I think New York's just a hall of mirrors. Everyone is chasing reflections of themselves."

Victoria's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Am I a reflection of you, Henry? Or are you mine? Or are we both chasing someone else?"

He studied her, letting the silence stretch, the clink of glasses and low beats filling the space between them. "We're all searching. Even when we find something... we doubt it. Maybe especially then."

His face was close now, eyes searching hers. Midnight struck—soft chimes threading through the bassline, slicing clean through the seduction.

"So," Henry murmured, "what do you say we stop searching. Just for tonight. See what we find."

Victoria's pulse quickened. The moment pulled at her—a tempting out from the bruising logic of her life. She wanted to fall into him. She didn't.

"This... this *isn't* who I really am," she said, pulling slightly away.

Henry blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this—*us, right now*—it's a detour. A beautiful one. But not the truth. We'd just be pretending. And lying to each other."

"I don't think I follow."

“We just found each other. I don’t want to ruin that.”

“You’re not ruining anything.” He leaned back, trying to read her. “I’m just not sure what you’re trying to protect.”

“There are thousands of people we pass every day. Ever wonder how many of them sleep with someone just to feel less alone? Or choose not to, for the same reason? You catch yourself in a window and say, ‘This is *not* who I am.’ But the thing is... it always is.”

Henry exhaled slowly, almost a laugh. “You sound like a riddle.”

She looked at him, steady. “Maybe I am.”

He nodded, then raised his glass. “You know what? That might be the most honest thing anyone’s told me in this city.”

She tilted her head, wary but amused. “That says more about the city than me.”

“I’m a simple man,” he said, grinning. “Looking for a warm meal at a fair price.”

Victoria smirked. “Are you?”

“Maybe not. Maybe I’m just another con artist in a suit. Like all of us.”

“You’re not going to charm me with that.”

“I think you’re already more tangled up than you’d like to admit.”

Something broke in her face then—a brief laugh, unguarded and real. “Maybe. But who do I fall for—the mask, or the face behind it?”

“Go for both,” he said, shrugging. “Two-for-one offer.”

She leaned in now, voice softening. “We build these identities to survive. Nine-to-five masks, after-dark masks. Eventually, they bleed into each other. And sometimes, we forget there’s anything underneath at all.”

Henry raised his glass again. “To finding out what’s underneath. Even if it takes forever.”

“Especially if it takes forever,” she echoed, their glasses clinking.

Outside, the streets of Soho glistened under a sheen of moisture and neon. The air was thick with steam from underground vents and the lingering scent of rain-slicked asphalt. Their footsteps fell in sync, the silence between them no longer awkward, but charged.

“It’s the second moonless night this month,” Victoria said, her breath visible in the cold. “They call it a *Black Moon*. Rare. Happens every twenty-nine months.”

Henry glanced up at the empty sky. “No light. No shadows. Just the in-between.”

At Henry’s building on Mercer Street, he paused before the door.

“Are we sure about this?” he asked.

Victoria held his gaze. “I’m sure that I’m unsure. And for once, I want to explore that. Not escape it.”

Henry smiled—something genuine, brief. “So before we go back to being ourselves, maybe we get to be someone else. Together.”

They stepped inside.

Sheets tangled. Skin cooling. The city murmured faintly outside, as if aware something private had unfolded and chose—for once—not to interrupt.

Victoria lay still, her fingers lightly tracing Henry’s shoulder.

“When I’m naked, I’m not pretending,” she said.

Henry didn’t reply right away. “Most of us wear more in bed than we do at work.”

“Depends who they’re sleeping with,” she answered.

“I used to think,” she said, “if I could just find someone who saw through all of it—the act, the ambition, the polish—I’d finally be real. But now I wonder if the mask is more honest than the face underneath.”

“That’s bleak.”

“That’s New York.”

He exhaled through his nose. “You said something earlier. About how we build these identities to survive the day and then try to undo them at night. But we forget how.”

“Because *survival* becomes identity,” she said. “Eventually, you start playing the role so well you convince even yourself.”

“I’ve spent years trying to seem like I belong in rooms I hate,” he admitted. “Traders, investors, guys who get off on power plays and fear. And I’m good at it. But I don’t remember when I started believing it was me.”

“Maybe it never was,” Victoria said. “Maybe we’re all just echoes of the city’s ambition. Trying to be somebody until we forget the body we started in.”

“What if this—*tonight*—is more real than all the days before it?”

“Then it’ll scare us. And we’ll bury it.”

“Or write about it. Turn it into something else.”

“A fiction?”

“A fiction between two people who almost believed it.”

She smiled. Not out of joy, but recognition.

The light was soft and gray, a pale curtain drifting in through the

windows. Morning in Manhattan, where time doesn't start—it resumes.

Victoria sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on one stocking, then the other. Her hair was tousled, but her posture was already correcting itself—spine straightening, voice quieting.

Henry stirred behind her. “You leaving already?”

She glanced back, halfway into her skirt. “Markets open in an hour. Copper futures wait for no one.”

“Right,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “Same.”

She found her earrings on the nightstand, held one up like she was checking its weight. “Did last night mean something?”

“Something,” he echoed.

She turned to face him. “Let's not cheapen it.”

“I wouldn't.”

But it was already fading. Not the feeling, but the permission to feel it.

Victoria finished dressing. “It doesn't *need* to mean anything.”

Henry sat up. “But it might, Victoria.”

She didn't answer. Just smoothed her skirt and crossed the room to the door. Before she opened it, she paused. A breath. A look.

“Take care of yourself, Henry.”

“You too.”

And just like that, she was gone. The door clicked shut like punctuation.

Henry sat in the quiet, still bare, the imprint of her body cooling on

the sheets beside him. Outside, a siren started up. The city had already moved on.

The lobby smelled of bleach. Henry nodded at the doorman—too casually—and stepped onto the sidewalk with his tie still in his pocket. The cold was sharper today as if the air itself were auditing him.

By the time he reached the office, the world had returned to its proper scale: numbers, screens, the tick-tick-tick of meaningless urgency. The desk looked the same; his chair hadn't moved, and yet it all felt off-kilter as if someone had shifted the floor beneath him a half-inch.

A coworker leaned over the partition.

"You look like hell."

Henry shrugged. "Spent the night in a year-long affair."

"Ah. Someone I know?"

"No. Someone I barely know."

He logged into his terminal. Copper. Oil. Soybean futures. The pixelated ballet of people betting on scarcity. He stared at the screen and forced himself to focus on the work. Position sizes. Hedging. Arbitrage. The comfort of impersonal risk.

Every hour or so, he checked his phone. No new messages. No missed calls. Just silence that felt... thick.

Victoria's apartment was immaculate. She'd purposely left it that way—so returning wouldn't feel like regression.

She showered. Dressed. Lined her eyes carefully. The armor always went on in stages.

On the walk to the office, she replayed pieces of the night—not in sequence, but in flashes: Henry's voice in the dark, the weight of his

hand on her back, that moment before the kiss where nothing had happened yet but everything already had.

She reached the office early. Sat down. Didn't speak for the first hour. Just opened her spreadsheets and let the data wash over her like cold water.

By noon, she was back in rhythm: decisive, poised, a voice in meetings others deferred to. But in the pauses—in the empty space between tasks—her mind wandered. Not toward longing, exactly. Something quieter. A dull ache for a version of herself that had briefly surfaced and then retreated.

At lunch, a colleague asked, "Everything good, Vic?"

She smiled. "Great."

And in the reflection of the glass wall behind them, she saw a woman who looked composed. That was enough. It had to be.

Days passed. Not many, but enough.

Neither Henry nor Victoria had made the next move—not because they didn't want to, but because they each expected the other to. A game of mutual restraint. Polite. Prideful. Fearful.

Henry told himself to wait. A couple of days, no big deal. Let it breathe.

But on the third night, alone in his apartment with the city flickering through the blinds, he typed out a message anyway:

"Still thinking about the Black Moon."

He stared at it. Read it back like it was someone else's poetry. Then hit send.

Across town, Victoria was stepping off the curb outside a café in

Chelsea, her mind already on a meeting, her coffee in one hand, phone in the other.

The taxi didn't hit her. But it came close enough to shake her spine.

The driver shouted something, muffled.

Her phone slipped from her fingers, clattered against the curb, and was flattened clean by the back tire as the cab sped off.

She stared at the crushed remains—spiderwebbed glass, bent frame, no signs of life. She picked it up anyway, out of habit. Behind her, a man asked if she was alright. She nodded, too dazed to answer.

By the time Henry's message arrived, the device was dead.

Back in Henry's world, the read receipt never came. He waited. Rechecked the time stamp. Told himself she was probably in a meeting. Told himself again an hour later. Told himself, out loud, at 1:42 a.m., that it didn't matter.

He didn't send another.

Victoria didn't think about Henry that night. Not directly. She was dealing with logistics—appointments, data recovery, transferring her SIM, picking out a replacement phone in a too-bright Midtown store where everyone looked like a clone of ambition.

By the time she reactivated her number, the message was gone. Never received. Never restored.

The silence between them had grown so gradually that neither of them noticed it was already permanent.

Time passed. And by the time Henry saw Victoria, she wasn't her.

It was a Thursday, just after dusk. Henry was ducking under an awning on Broome Street, rain threading down the sky like thin wire. A cigarette hung from his lips, half-forgotten. The wind shifted, and he looked up.

Across the street, under the washed-out glow of a storefront sign, a woman laughed. Her hair caught the light just right. Same cut. Same coat. Same elegant, casual tilt of the head. She leaned into the man beside her—tall, sharp suit, confidence in the spine.

Henry froze.

It wasn't her. He knew it wasn't. But the echo was enough to sucker-punch his gut.

He looked away, then back. The couple was already moving down the block, silhouettes merging with the blur of umbrellas and cab lights.

He told himself it was nothing. A trick of the weather, his mind misfiring.

But that night, he couldn't sleep. He kept seeing her face—except now it was stitched onto someone else's memory, corrupted by context. The way she might look when she belonged to someone else. The way he never quite had her.

Across the river, Victoria had her own glitch.

It was two nights later. She was at a gallery in DUMBO—clean lines, cold wine, a room full of strangers pretending to remember each other. She stepped outside for air and caught sight of a man in a sidewalk café across the street. Dark hair. Lean. That same posture, that same half-cocked smile.

He leaned toward a woman with red hair and perfect posture, whispering something. The woman laughed—tilted her head the exact way Victoria did when trying not to show she was impressed.

It didn't even make sense. The angles were wrong. The jawline was too sharp. And still, her stomach dropped.

Her heart knew it wasn't Henry.

But her body hadn't caught up.

She turned back inside before she could be caught staring, furious at herself. Furious at him, too, for living on in her reflexes.

That night, she lay awake trying to remember: had he ever touched her like that in public? Had she ever laughed like that with him?

Or had the city just injected a better version of her into someone else's arms?

They each began walking more cautiously after that. Not just looking out for traffic—but for glimpses of the past disguised as the present. The city was full of doubles. People you thought were someone. People who were someone, but not to you anymore.

What was worse—seeing them again? Or seeing someone who might be them, and knowing for sure they weren't?

Henry sat at his kitchen table with the lights off, laptop open, fingers hovering.

He wasn't working. The market had closed hours ago, and his inbox was blessedly empty. He'd poured himself a drink he hadn't touched. The only light came from the screen, casting his face in blue, hollow tones.

He opened a new message and typed her name.

Victoria.

Paused.

Deleted it.

Typed again.

Vic—

Backspaced.

Then:

"Hey. Been thinking about you."

Delete. Too open.

"Saw someone who looked like you the other night."

Delete. Pathetic.

"Hope you're well."

Delete. Nothing.

The blinking cursor taunted him. He didn't know what he wanted from her. Not exactly. A reply, maybe. A sign she remembered. Or regretted. Or hadn't moved on as easily as she seemed to have.

He thought about sending something absurd, something that would force her to respond out of sheer confusion:

"Do you believe in the Black Moon?"

But he didn't type that either.

Instead, he stared at the blank space where her name used to live and closed the laptop slowly, like a coffin lid.

The apartment was too quiet. The kind of quiet that made even memory sound loud. The leftover scent of her—faint, almost imagined—still lingered in the folds of the jacket she'd draped over a chair weeks ago.

He didn't throw it out. Couldn't.

He poured the drink into the sink and went to bed without brushing his teeth. Lying in the dark, he told himself he'd write her tomorrow.

He wouldn't.

Victoria sat at her kitchen table, glass of wine in one hand, a half-filled notebook open in front of her.

She hadn't written in months. Not really. Not since before him.

She told herself she didn't have time, that words were a luxury for people not paid to predict things. But tonight, she had cracked. Not because of some tidal wave of emotion—but because of a scent.

She had pulled a scarf from her closet, and it smelled like his cologne.

Faint, diluted. But unmistakable.

Now she sat, pen in hand, staring at the blank page like it owed her answers.

She wrote:

Why does his memory feel more real than most of the men I've loved?

She stopped. Crossed it out. Too dramatic.

Started again:

"We didn't even know each other. Not really. It was a night. A moment. We shared skin and ideas. That's not love."

She stared at the sentence. Crossed it out too.

"Then why do I keep rewriting it in my head?"

She sipped her wine. Tried again:

"Maybe connection is a fluke. A chemical misfire. Maybe it only feels real because the timing was wrong."

She underlined *timing* twice. Then once more. Then put the pen down.

No. That wasn't it.

It wasn't timing. It was *truth*. Something about him made her speak plainly, without strategy. And now she missed that version of herself—the one who wasn't angling, performing, proving.

She stared at the page until her eyes burned.

When the glass was empty and the words had dried up, she whispered something aloud—not meant for the room, not even for herself.

"Where the fuck did you go?"

And then she laughed. Not because it was funny, but because it was all so stupid.

She didn't say his name. She didn't have to.

The gallery hummed with the usual affectation: soft lighting, hard angles, people dressed like punctuation marks. Tribeca on a Thursday. No urgency. Just performance.

Some came to be seen. Others came to forget they hadn't been.

Victoria arrived alone, fashionably late in a way she didn't believe in but still obeyed. She scanned the room without looking like she was scanning it. The art on display—sculptural forms twisting into

themselves—was forgettable, maybe on purpose. Emotion, once again, outsourced to metal and curation.

She accepted a glass of champagne without tasting it.

Henry had been there for twenty minutes already, nursing a short pour of bourbon he hadn't asked for but couldn't refuse. He stood near a bronze coil that might have been a spine or a faucet. It didn't matter.

What mattered was that he'd seen her the moment she stepped in. Of course he had.

She moved like someone aware of the effect she had, and tired of having it.

He didn't approach right away. Neither did she.

Instead, they orbited. Quiet. Separate. Watching each other not watching. Two ghosts in a room full of bodies. Neither ready to blink first.

A man leaned in to speak to Victoria. She smiled, politely, briefly. But Henry could tell it wasn't real. He recognized her performative charm like a fingerprint. She wore it like armor.

He shifted his stance.

She noticed.

She always did.

The room folded in slightly. The hum became static.

Then—without fanfare, without pretense—he crossed the space between them. Not a walk of courage. Not a march of regret. Just a man moving toward a woman he used to imagine more clearly.

She turned before he spoke. Not startled. Ready.

Their eyes locked, and for the first time in weeks, there was no city between them.

“How’ve you been?” Henry asked, voice just low enough to slip under the buzz of gallery chatter.

“I’ve been good,” Victoria replied, and meant it in the most nonspecific way possible.

He nodded. “Good.”

A beat.

“I texted,” he added, careful not to let it sound like blame.

“When?”

“Sometime after. Not right away. But... soon enough.”

“I didn’t get it.” Her tone held no defense, just fact. “I lost my phone that week. Literally crushed. It took a while to replace it. I wasn’t ignoring you.”

He nodded again, slower this time.

“Oh.”

Victoria glanced down at her drink, as if the answer had settled at the bottom. “I would’ve replied.”

Silence folded in.

Henry studied the metal sculpture beside them, as if it might translate her subtext. “I thought maybe you were just... done.”

“I thought *you* were,” she said. “I thought maybe it only meant something to me.”

Henry exhaled, half a laugh, no joy in it. “Funny.”

“I thought I saw you one night,” she said suddenly. “Outside a café. With someone.”

He looked up. "Ah. No. Wasn't me."

"Wasn't me either," she said, smiling.

Their eyes met again, and this time something shifted. Not big. But noticeable. Like a page turning without the hand that turned it.

A woman in a blazer drifted past, throwing an air kiss in Victoria's direction. She returned the gesture, all reflex. The interruption gave Henry a chance to glance at her profile—still elegant, still unreadable.

She looked back. "You staying long?"

"Not sure. You?"

"Same. We could hang out."

"Henry, I'm not ..."

"What?"

"*Texted?* You should have called."

"*Maybe.* You said your cell was destroyed. The results would have been the same."

Another beat. The quiet was loaded with unexpected resentment.

Then, as if cued by an unseen stage manager, the gallery's host swept into view, all teeth and curated warmth.

"Victoria! You came!"

"And Henry! Of course. You two know each other?"

A pause.

"Yes," Victoria said.

"No," Henry said, simultaneously.

The host laughed, already turning. "Oh, I love this city."

They were alone again.

“I should go,” she said, already stepping back. “Too many people I don’t want to pretend to know.”

Henry didn’t argue.

She offered a soft, ambiguous smile—the kind that could mean see you soon or see you never—and turned.

He watched her go, again.

Victoria

She left without saying goodbye. No fanfare, no second glance.

The gallery door clicked behind her and the city swallowed her up like it always does. The cold hit hard—less weather, more punctuation. She tightened her coat and walked quickly, head down, heels clicking like a clock counting backward.

She didn’t cry. That would have been indulgent.

But her mind wouldn’t settle.

His face kept flashing.

She hated how much she wanted to turn back. Just to say: “That wasn’t nothing.”

But she didn’t. Because she couldn’t be sure, and if he wasn’t sure, then what was the point?

She walked faster.

The streetlights blurred.

At a crosswalk, someone brushed past her with the same cologne Henry wore. Her breath caught.

She waited for the light to change. It didn’t. So she crossed anyway.

Henry stayed.

Not for the art. Not for the crowd. Just... stayed.

He stood near a wall installation he didn't understand and pretended to study it. The host reappeared once, gesturing wildly to someone named Elise, but Henry had already drifted into the periphery, blending into the gallery's dead space.

He replayed it. Every word. Every pause.

Wasn't me. Wasn't me either.

A confession? A defense? A farewell?

He wasn't sure what he'd wanted her to say.

Something simple, maybe. Or something ruinous.

But she'd smiled that goddamn elegant smile and disappeared like fog. And now all he could do was stand there, bourbon in hand, wishing he'd said something messier. Something honest.

He tossed the rest of the drink back and grimaced.

It was warm and useless.

New York doesn't remember every name. But it remembers the weight of people passing through.

It remembers Victoria's breath clouding the window of a cab that took her nowhere.

It remembers Henry's hand hovering over a send button that never glowed green.

It remembers the space between them—not wide, but widening.

The city keeps these moments, sealed in steam vents and locked behind brownstone facades. They don't vanish. They just get... absorbed.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

Here, nothing ends cleanly.

Connections rust.

Words rot in draft folders.

Footsteps echo in apartments where someone else now sleeps.

Sometimes they walk the same blocks at the same hour, missing each other by minutes, by inches. Sometimes they look up at the same sky and don't realize it.

New York has seen it all before.

Two people mistake honesty for danger.

Two people decide silence is safer than misreading a look.

Two people believe timing is everything, and then wait for time to do the work.

But time doesn't work here.

Here, time is haze. A wash of neon and noise and memory cut with the dull blade of motion.

Here, even the clocks lie.

Yet the city does not mourn.

It catalogues.

It observes.

It waits.

Because eventually—at the wrong time or the perfect one—it will put them in the same room again.

Not to fix anything.

Not for closure.

Just to see what they do.

The subway doors opened with a shuddering sigh. Henry stepped in, earbuds in, but nothing playing. He scanned the car like a habit—people, shapes, exits. Just another commute.

Then he saw her.

Victoria entered from the other end, coat unbuttoned, face flushed from the wind: no makeup, or none he could see. A year or more had gone by.

Neither of them smiled.

She grabbed the pole near the door. He stayed where he was, hand around the overhead bar, knuckles whitening with every jolt of the train.

The car was full but silent—phones out, heads down, everyone somewhere else except them.

The train lurched, sharp and unceremonious. Victoria caught herself against the pole, fingers tightening. Henry looked down, then up again, as if checking that she was still real.

"Victoria."

It came out quieter than he intended. Still, she heard it.

"Henry."

Her tone was clipped, neutral, like greeting a coworker at a funeral.

"Heading downtown?" he asked, the words dry in his throat.

"Crosstown," she replied. "You?"

"Downtown."

The train swayed again, metal screeching in protest. They rocked with it—together, apart.

A pause. Not long. Just heavy.

“How’ve you been?” he said.

“Fine.” She glanced at a subway ad for a meditation app, as if it might offer an escape route.

“Same. Oh! Thought about you the other night. There was a *Black Moon*.”

“Oh, right. No, it was the *Blue Moon*. *Blue Moon*—full twice in one month. *Black Moon* when it’s new—twice.”

“Ah.”

“You reversed them.”

“I see. It was *Blue Moon* the other night, not *Black Moon*.”

“Exactly.”

A flicker of motion outside the window—the tunnel lights stuttering past like time refusing to stop.

The train slowed. The intercom buzzed something unintelligible. The doors opened. Cold air poured in.

They didn’t move.

“Well,” she said, adjusting her bag, a forced pivot.

“Good to see you,” he said.

“You too.”

The doors closed with the usual finality.

He looked down. She looked out.

The train moved again.

And just like that, they were once more two people in a city that doesn't believe in second chances—only second sightings.

The weeks that followed returned to form.

Markets opened. Clients called. Dinners were scheduled and canceled. Nothing extraordinary occurred, and yet both Henry and Victoria moved through their days like people trailing something invisible.

He walked past the Bistro once. Just to see if it was still there. It was. Same awning, same chef out front, scowling into a cigarette like he'd lost a bet with God.

Henry didn't go in.

Victoria, meanwhile, passed a subway musician playing a jazz cover of a song she once claimed to love. She stopped briefly, not because she liked it now, but because it reminded her who she'd been that night.

Neither of them spoke about the subway sighting. Not to friends. Not to themselves.

It was just a glitch in the routine. A pause too long in a city allergic to stillness.

But it lingered.

Henry checked his phone more. The phases of the moon occasionally.

Victoria considered writing again. In her journal this time. But the words didn't come.

He haunted the corners of her thoughts like an unfinished sentence.

She haunted his sleep.

They didn't see each other again.

THE CITY BETWEEN US

But on some level, they both knew they were still walking the same map. Same avenues, same shadows, same odds.

New York would keep them apart—not cruelly, just casually, as it does.

But some nights, as the wind curled off the river and slipped through the alleys, when the moon was hidden, each would pause for a breath too long, a glance too far—and wonder if the other had done the same.

It wasn't love.

It was memory, disguised as possibility.

It was enough to ache.

They never met again, but the city never let them forget.

AFTERWORD

THE CITY BETWEEN THEM

In New York, you don't solve the city. You survive your room.

Rose's kitchen on 112th Street. Greta's brownstone stairwell on Beekman Place. Julie's South Village tenement window view of the Twin Towers. Three rooms, three decades, three women.

East Harlem, Late '70s–Early '80s: Rose's Kitchen

The city's near-bankruptcy in 1975 didn't start the decline, but it took away the brakes. Rose Melito, seventy-eight, widowed, held her ground the only way she knew—cooking in a kitchen that remembered the neighbors who'd gone. Sauce on the stove, radio low, the old neighborhood lived on in habit if nowhere else. She had seen the Harlem riots of '35, '43, and '64. The lesson stuck: institutions stall, but people on the block don't get that choice.

Pete Hamill once wrote that New York was where beauty and ruin could share the same building. For Rose, beauty was the routine that steadied her. Ruin was the boy down the hall. Javier—once a child she'd watched grow, now thin from heroin—came to her door shaking, asked for money, showed a gun. The fight was fast. A warning

shot ricocheted off the marble floor. The stone remembered more than the people who put it down.

Beekman Place, Early 1950s: Greta's Stairwell

Three miles south and three decades earlier, Beekman Place looked out over the East River. In the early '50s, the United Nations was still new, Turtle Bay dressed up as its neighbor with chauffeurs and polished lobbies. A single woman could still rent a floor on a temp's pay if she were disciplined. Greta Van der Linden did—typing pools by day, careful budgeting by night.

Writers like Truman Capote chronicled the neighborhood's small cruelties: who mattered, who didn't, how manners worked as weapons. Greta lived that world in miniature. She woke one February morning to Monk playing from the apartment below—Frederick's. He had charm, and he knew how to use it. A book returned, a drink offered, laughter that bent her judgment. By Valentine's Day, the affair had turned into a spectacle. At the St. Regis, he humiliated her, laughing with another woman while Greta watched.

She left quietly. Back home, she took a screwdriver to the stairwell banister. No speeches, no noise. Just a loose screw. The line between accident and intent fades in the dark. Hours later, when footsteps stumbled on the stairs, the building answered with a crack.

Capote would have described her gloves, her drink without ice, the room's theater. But this wasn't theater. It was bookkeeping. Greta is closing the balance in a city that never remembers its debts.

Greenwich Village, Mid-Late 1990s: Julie's Window

The Village has always been where New York tells its own stories. Once it was Beats and folk singers; by the '90s, the storefronts sold concepts, but the back rooms kept their codes.

Julie, a thirty-something American of Italian descent, worked the coat check at Joe's and lived above Houston. From her kitchen

window, she watched fog drift off the Hudson, tai chi in the park, the Twin Towers dim in the mist.

Ennio from upstairs brought espresso with anisette and a gesture: two fingers to the chin. The front door at Joe's had been blown apart overnight. No police, no report. By dinner, the glass would be swept and the story reduced to a shrug.

Julie had none of Greta's polish, none of Rose's history. She wasn't in the rooms where decisions were made—only near the coats, catching names, reading glances. The Village still fed on appetite, even if the accents had changed.

The writers who once mapped the neighborhood—Kerouac, Ginsberg, O'Hara—were gone. Julie's Village was after that glow, a place where old families and new money crossed paths without touching. Her revelation was simple: nothing lasts. The towers outside her window looked fixed, but so did neighborhoods before they vanished.

The Observers and the Rooms

Each woman lived with a chorus. For Rose, it was reporters like Hamill who showed Harlem's wreckage without erasing its music. For Greta, it was Capote and his kind, cataloging cruelty with style but missing the stakes. For Julie, the chorus was gone. The Village of the '90s spoke in backroom codes—no literature, just gestures and silence.

Pocket Universes, Same Gravity

On paper, Rose, Greta, and Julie have little in common. In practice, they lived by the same rules.

Rule one: Power moves quietly. A gun in a hallway, a smirk at a bar, a gesture at a restaurant door. By the time it's loud, it's already decided.

AFTERWORD

Rule two: Institutions arrive late. Police, politics, the UN—all slow. People in kitchens and stairwells don't get that luxury.

Rule three: Agency is improvised. Rose grabbed a barrel. Greta turned a screw. Julie kept watch. Small acts, but enough.

Rule four: Loneliness is constant. Surrounded but alone. New York sells proximity, not company.

The Broader Picture

It's tempting to say Harlem "fell," Beekman Place "endured," the Village "sold out." Easy slogans. The truth is messier. Harlem shifted and shifted again. Beekman Place masked power in elegance. The Village kept its myth even as it changed hands.

The common thread isn't decline or gentrification. It's indifference. New York doesn't take sides. It lets you rise, fall, or disappear. The city offers a window. What you do with it is your choice.

Coda: The Rooms

Rose waits after the sirens. Greta listens for steps that never come. Julie watches fog clear from the towers. The city keeps going, as it always does.

Hamill found dignity north of 96th. Capote spotted charm south of 59th. The Village confused freedom with proximity. Each got part of it right. None of them complete.

So take the portraits together: Harlem's endurance, Beekman Place's polish, the Village's hidden codes. Rose, Greta, Julie. A widow, a temp, a coat-check girl. The city between them is New York itself—improvised, indifferent, unromantic, alive.

It won't save you. It will force you to choose. That's how you survive your room.

END NOTES

“The City Between Us” (“Crosstown”) Top in Fiction’s pick for Best Short Story, December 2024

“Skyline” Top in Fiction’s Pick for Best Short Serial, March 2025

“After Everything I’ve Done For You” Top in Fiction’s pick for Best Short Serial, April 2025

“The Six Inch Skyscraper” Top in Fiction’s pick for Best Short Story, week of July 13th, 2025

“Closed Casket” Top in Fiction’s pick for Best Short Story, week of August 11th, 2025

www.topinfiction.com

“Flatiron” and *“Suttle House”* were published at Half and One.

<https://halfandone.com/flatiron/>

“Innocent Bystander,” story idea by Julie Pastorino

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Arturo was born in New York Presbyterian Hospital on Manhattan's Upper East Side, a fourth-generation New Yorker whose family has lived and worked in Manhattan for over a century. He spent his childhood years in Greenwich Village. His mother, Julie, was a chef and restaurant owner, and his stepfather, Mike, ran The Village Purple Onion nightclub in the 1960s.

His family history is tied to the city's skyline: his great-grandfather worked on the spire of the Chrysler Building when it was the tallest in the world, and as a boy, Michael explored the unfinished towers of the World Trade Center—early experiences that shaped his interest in the city's architecture and history.

Michael studied playwriting at the New School for Social Research and acting at HB Studios. He staged plays in New York, London, Boston, and Los Angeles. He's also written screenplays, film treatments, and a web series before turning to short fiction in 2020. His stories have appeared in publications including *Half and One*, *Vigilante Crime* and *Pulp*.

<https://michaelarturo.substack.com>

