

PROLOGUE

Behind the Scarlet Door

Johnny was twenty-two years old and only wanted to have sex. Other things, too, he was sure of that, but they receded so far into the background haze of his conscious state that they generally went unregistered. That's what had driven him, post-high school, from Massachusetts to Manhattan, where he was ostensibly a stagehand but really just a dude hanging around the theater scene to meet beautiful, smart, talented women drawn to the promise of the Big Apple.

He'd lucked into a square jaw, a decent fastball that gave him athlete cred, an ounce of acting ability from his mom, and if he worked out twenty minutes a day, he could keep a six-pack. It seemed unfair, almost, the advantages the world had given him, and he wanted to make sure he was respectful of those gifts. And grateful.

Lacey was all-American—round face with dimples, long hair with bangs, curves all day. She was young and firm and he was young and firm, and he knew enough to know that he should appreciate every red second of this phase of his life. Johnny Seabrook, a helluva wasp name for a kid whose grampa was a carpet installer. The real family name, Schetter,

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was changed at Ellis Island for obvious reasons. It had taken his family four generations to get from Needham across Wellesley Avenue. As academic as they were now, they still had blue collar running in their veins. That's what Johnny loved so much about New York. Everyone there was dying to reinvent themselves, and they were all happy to embrace whoever you wanted to be as long as you returned the favor.

He and Lacey had fast and furious sex whenever they could. Over lunch break. On his futon at night, pausing to watch a movie, then twice more before falling asleep. She was great, soft, and her hair smelled like green apples and money. She came from the Hamptons and was hooked into that party scene, too, which he'd only gotten a glimpse of on reality-TV shows. But it seemed like that's where it was at, "it" being the future he'd been aiming at for as long as he could remember.

They'd only been seeing each other a few weeks when she'd rolled over after one of their midday trysts and mentioned a party out there over Labor Day. Some rich finance dude who kept a constant party going, like that Gatsby guy from the novel. Lacey wasn't gonna be around, a family trip to the French Riviera, which to Johnny was as fantastical a place as the fifth moon of Jupiter. But she was fine with his going without her, even booked him an Uber through her account 'cuz she knew he didn't have the dough. She said a few of her girlfriends would be there and it was cool if he wanted to get with them because it's not like she wasn't gonna be hooking up with French guys.

New York women, man! So different from the Boston folks he came from, with their New England rigor, Puritan practicalities, and flinty work ethic.

The place was on Billionaire's Row, Lacey said, and when he asked for the address, she replied with a word: Tartarus. Some of the places there were named, she explained, like on the Cape. He didn't have any paper in reach, but he found a loose marker on the floor next to his futon so he'd written it down on the white midsole of his throwback Vans.

The next Saturday a bit before ten at night, the Uber dropped him off at the end of a winding road that looked like some kind of royal drive. These weren't oceanfront houses so much as coastal palaces. A wide-open vista overlooking Shinnecock Bay on one side, soft sand beaches on the other. Even at this hour, Johnny could hear the crash of waves and the cries of

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seagulls pinwheeling in the southwest summer wind. He could taste the sea.

He followed the folks streaming up Meadow Lane to an enormous house with a private dock. Cliques and clusters, the young and gorgeous mixed with the mature and well-preserved. An old-fashioned wooden sign announced it as Tartarus, the wide letters painted with a tartan pattern like from a kilt. Moonlight glinted off the quartz stone of the circular driveway, and valets in red vests were lining up vehicles worth more than his parents' house. He was swept along with a cluster of little-black-dress types through a foyer the size of his apartment building, past a tumbling waterfall feature, and then out into the backyard, where the party was in full swing. A squat man with Warhol glasses—some famous designer?—wheeled and offered him and the women a snort of something from a no-shit silver spoon.

Johnny figured it would be rude to decline.

The party swirled and eddied, and the lights were oh so bright, and he was laughing hard, and anyone whose eye he caught laughed with him.

Chinese paper lanterns tugged at their strings overhead, casting a reddish glow. There were snow crab claws in bathtubs of ice, cheerful bright capsules passed on hors d'oeuvres trays along with fennel puff pastries, the best cover band he'd ever heard throwing down some serious eighties rock. In the churn of the crowd, he thought he spotted that one supermodel and then the journalist who'd had that scandal with the wine bottle. There was that politician—senator? congressman?—he remembered from the news. All those household names in clusters, joking and drinking and snorting and groping.

Someone was getting head on the diving board.

Rich people, man!

Two appetizer poppers down and halfway through his third gin and tonic, he bumped into someone and almost spilled right down her plunging neckline. He had to force his eyes north. She was a goddess, hair picked out in an Afro, bronzed skin, loose backless summer dress. Her cheekbones were accented with fierce strokes of makeup, and she was so attractive it made no human sense.

It felt wrong to even be looking at her.

"Wow," he said.

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She gave a regal half turn, her bare shoulder nearly clipping his chin. On the back of her neck was a blue-and-gold awareness ribbon tattoo with small vertical lettering on the left tail: BOSTON STRONG.

Johnny felt his heart lift; it was as good an in as he was gonna get at a party like this. "You're from Boston, huh?" He tapped his chest with his thumb. "Wellesley. You come in for the party?"

She regarded him. "Don't you get it?"

"Get what?"

"You're a toy like me. I'm not looking for another toy. I'm looking for an owner."

A cigarette girl passed between them strapped to a tray sporting cannabis cotton candy and a medley of joints, and then the goddess was gone in a ninja poof, and he wondered if she'd even been real.

He was laughing now. It was so ridiculous that he, Johnny Seabrook, number-two high-school pitcher from the not-too-rich part of Wellesley, was here among the clouds and the stars.

The old guys had money, that was for sure, but he knew he was cuter than he deserved to be, so he had that going for him, at least. Sure enough he caught the eye of a redhead in a red satin dress across the way, and he hoisted his glass for a toast before realizing he'd set it down somewhere. She wiggled a finger at him, and he followed her into the house. They played grown-up hide-and-seek, Johnny pursuing her through the crowd from room to room. God knew the mansion was set up for it, with nooks and crannies, secret passages, hidden rooms behind bookcases. There was crazy shit going on everywhere—metal tubs full of champagne, tables brimming with oysters, a half-clothed orgy on the leather couches of a library. At every turn there was another guy in a tux balancing a tray of cocktails. Johnny drifted through a miasma of pot smoke, the good stuff that tasted like live resin. The contact high compounded his other highs until he felt like he was floating through the halls.

He lost track of the girl in red and then of what room he was in and then of his face, which felt rubbery, like something stretched over his skull.

He came back into himself sprawled on a pool table with a ruddy-cheeked man with wobbly jowls beaming down at him—the anchor on that one morning show—and then he realized the guy's chin was wet and he had his hand shoved down Johnny's 501s.

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He tried to say, “No,” but it came out babylike—“Nuh”—and then he was stumbling out of the room trying to fasten his belt, the floor refusing to stay steady underfoot. Everything had taken on a horrible cast, like he’d telescoped in beyond where freedom was fun into the place where it became limitless, dizzying, terrifying. He was crying, and he wanted his high-school room with his Red Sox banner on the wall and his mom and dad and his nerdy-cool baby sis who had so many opinions and most of them right, and he felt so far from home.

And he thought about what his parents would say and his teachers, too, and how he’d brought this on himself, thinking that he could be a big man in the world, that he could have this much fun without consequences, and it was all so dirty and awful. And it was his fault for catching a ride to God knew where on the word of some girl he only half knew, and he’d taken all sorts of shit into his body without thinking about it, and now he was getting what he deserved.

Disoriented, he staggered from room to room but didn’t seem to get anywhere. The mansion was like one big maze where everything led to everything else. And he was crying now and thought about how he couldn’t tell anyone what had happened and he wouldn’t want to drink ever again or see people and he couldn’t go home and face his parents and partygoers were looming before him on the stairs, their faces ballooning. A woman in a platinum-blond wig ran a fingertip down his cheek and then sucked his tears off her print, and then he was running up instead of down just to get away from her.

Two security types on the landing of the third floor—one obese and sloppy, the other gym-hardened with pristinely coiffed hair—were distracted with a woman vomiting pyrotechnically into a floor vase. Johnny slipped past, unnoticed. He blacked out a moment and then . . .

. . . the artwork sliding off the walls, but it was quiet at least. He just needed to catch his breath. He realized he was probably near the master suite—wing?—of the house, since no one was up here, and he felt his gorge rising suddenly. There was a big door with no handle that was upholstered with fancy scarlet fabric like a couch, and he figured it might be a rich-person bathroom, so he shouldered into it, but it didn’t open and he didn’t want to barf on the marble tiles, so he hit it again hard, and it popped open and he spilled inside, landing on a shag carpet and . . .

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... couldn't believe what he was seeing, a man cocked back in his chair, head thrown back, lips rouged with pleasure, bathed in the light of a hundred sins . . .

...

... spinning around in the chair, face twisted with fury . . .

...

... like a punch that went straight through his shoulder blade and out the front . . .

...

... spewing vomit as he stagger-slid down a tight servant's staircase . . .

...

... someone chasing, shouting . . .

...

... tripping and then falling down step after step . . .

...

... memory of stumbling into the wrong room, what he had seen there, no one was supposed to see . . .

...

... fresh air hit him, and he mostly woke up.

Blood trickling from his ear, left knee staved in, crimson blotch spreading at the breast of his cheap button-up shirt, Johnny gasped for oxygen as he tumbled out through French doors to the side of the mansion, his Vans skidding on a stretch of curated Bermuda grass.

The desolate side yard was unlit—no doubt by design.

No signs of life, the mansion so large that the backyard was a good quarter mile away. The cover band was giving the Boss a run for his money.

*—liddle gurl is yer daddy home, did he go 'n' leave ya all alone—
He couldn't go there. He couldn't trust any of these crazy rich people.*

Help, he said, or at least he thought he did, but the word was still inside his head.

His belt remained unbuckled, and the shame of what he'd allowed to be done to him swelled up like a wave, threatening to pull him under. He couldn't get help, couldn't talk about this ever.

Ahead, a rise of trees partially blocked the putting green of the neighboring estate. The house looked a mile away, as distant as a castle on a

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hill. The wind had shifted from the north, bringing from the bay and marshland the stomach-turning stench of low tide, fresh salt air turned rotten.

Drunk with pain, Johnny swung his head toward the front of the mansion, his vision bright and woozy, the edges of things blending together. A spill of light glowed around the side from the massive circular driveway.

The valets. He could trust the valets.

Footsteps behind him, hammering down the stairs, approaching thunder.

He wobbled a bit, fingers splayed on his torso over the wetness where chest met shoulder. The bullet hole seeped more blood, dark like ink.

Had he . . . had he really been shot?

—and the Boss was singing about a knife, edgy and dull and—

He moved toward the valets, fumbling his iPhone from his pocket, thumbing the three digits, but his fingers were numb, insensate, and the slick case slipped from his hand and tumbled before he could press CALL.

He took a knee to pick it up, but then he couldn't rise and blood was drooling from his bottom lip and he was crying and the news anchor's ruddy face filled his mind and he understood for the first time in his charmed life what it meant to feel violated, demeaned, and he couldn't imagine talking about it ever or about what he'd seen behind the scarlet door, and then the footsteps were coming up behind him, soft on the lush grass, and a shadow stretched slender and sinister beneath the susurrating leaves.

He could see his own face reflected up in the obsidian screen of his phone just beyond his reaching fingers, and then he saw another face appear over his shoulder, the face of the man from the room behind the scarlet door.

Somewhere the backyard band kept 000-000-000-ing, and it was floating there, that awful face, inhuman and blank like a ghost's, the rest of the body lost to shadow, and Johnny whimpered and drooled blood and strained for the phone in the grass, his fingertips brushing it, the screen coming to life, that green CALL circle right there millimeters from his fingertips.

But then he heard a thud, and his hand went hot with pain.

He saw that it had been staked to the lawn.

He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a rush of air, and then the man grabbed his hair and a voice whispered in his ear, "Naughty boy."

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The knife slid up and clear of Johnny's hand with a tug, and then his head was yanked back further, baring the throat, and sensation blended with song, his heart pounding like the distant music, his ears thrumming to the rush of percussion, his nerves on fiii-ire.

1

Hold My Vodka

It wasn't the first time Evan had drunk vodka atop a glacier.

But it was the first time he'd traveled to a glacier with the express purpose of drinking vodka.

Not just any glacier, but Langjökull, the behemoth nearest Iceland's capital. Fifteen hundred meters above sea level, the air was frigid enough that Evan sensed it leaking between his teeth, even within the fireplace-warmed interior of the pop-up bar.

It had taken some navigating to get here. A connecting flight to Reykjavik followed by a journey across the tundra with sufficient four-wheel-drive turbulence to make his insides feel as though they'd been tumbled by an industrial dryer.

He'd arrived at the precise coordinates—64.565653°N, 20.024822°W—twenty minutes ago, time enough to shake the numbness from his fingertips and take his first sip from the specialty batch of handmade spirit. Its name derived from the word for “smoke,” Reyka had a barley base, augmented with water filtered

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by the rock of a four-thousand-year-old lava stream, making it the purest liquid on earth.

The bar here in the middle of the desolate nowhere was little more than a sparse wooden structure composed of beams and walls. Well-loved chessboards on tables. A foursome of burly Icelanders in football jerseys. Picture windows overlooking miles of blindingly white tundra. Decorative puffins peeked out from the shelves of bottles.

Evan took another sip of the limited-edition batch he'd traveled over four thousand miles to sample. Silky mouthfeel, rose and lavender, a hint of grain on the back half. He set his shot glass, fashioned from glacial ice, down on the bar before him.

It was promptly shattered by the elbow of one of the footballers wheeling drunkenly to grab at the waist of a passing female tourist. Evan exhaled evenly and swept the ice remnants from the bar. Though the young men were rowdy, cocky, and redlining their blood-alcohol, he could sense that they weren't awful guys. But they were on their way to becoming awful if no one provided a course correction.

On Evan's other side, a lantern-jawed retiree was bragging to a gaggle of Australian coeds and anyone else within earshot that he'd been a member of the legendary Viking Squad S.W.A.T. Team known as *Sérsveit Ríkislögreglustjórans*. A handsome man a few years past his prime, he basked in the glow of the young women's attention.

Buoyant and amused, the Australians fumbled through his pronunciation lessons. Well built, with beautiful smiles and generous laughs, they hung on his words, as pleased by the unlikely company as he was.

"—we have no standing army," the former cop was telling them in near-perfect English. "So we're the last line of defense when it comes to facing deadly threats."

Evan leaned forward and flagged the bartender for another shot. As it was being poured in front of him, another of the footballers snatched it from beneath the bottle and slammed it.

Evan stared at the pool of vodka puddled on the bar between his

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hands. Then up at the bartender, a pale Nordic towhead. "Would you like to talk to them?" Evan said. "Or should I?"

The bartender shrugged. "There are four of them. And we're way out here. There's nothing to do."

"Well," Evan said. "Not *nothing*."

The bartender gave him another shot, this time safeguarding it through the handoff. "American?" he asked. "What did you come to Iceland for? Business? Whale watching?"

Evan hoisted the shot glass. "This."

"You flew all the way here?" The bartender's mouth cracked open in disbelief. "For *vodka*?"

Why not? Evan thought.

He'd arrived at a point in his life where he was finally capable of indulging small pleasures. To say the least, his childhood had been rough-and-tumble. Pinballed through a series of foster homes, he'd been ripped out of any semblance of ordinary life at the age of twelve to be trained covertly as an assassin. The fully deniable government program was designed to turn him into an expendable weapon who could execute missions illegal under international law. Orphans were trained alone for solo operations—no peers, no support, no backup. Were it not for Jack Johns, Evan's handler and father figure, the Program would likely have been successful in extinguishing his humanity. The hard part wasn't turning him into a killer, Jack had taught him from the gate. The hard part was keeping him human. Integrating those two opposing drives had been the great challenge of Evan's life.

After a decade and change spent committing unsanctioned hits around the globe, Evan had gone AWOL from the Program and lost Jack all at once. Since then he'd committed himself to staying off the radar while using his skills to help others who were just as powerless as he'd been as a young boy—pro bono missions he conducted as the Nowhere Man.

Right now he was enjoying a break between missions. The closest thing he had to family or an associate, a sixteen-year-old hacker named Joey Morales, had taken an open-ended leave to explore

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her independence, whatever the hell that meant. Against every last one of his engrained habits, he'd become personally if erratically involved with a district attorney named Mia Hall, enough so that he'd been at her side two months ago as she was wheeled into a life-threatening surgery that had left her in a coma without a clear prognosis. Her ten-year-old son, Peter, another of the select few Evan felt a human attachment to, was now in the capable hands of Mia's brother and sister-in-law. In the collective absence of Joey and Mia, Los Angeles had felt quiet enough for Evan to rediscover the fierce loneliness in freedom.

To his left, the Icelandic cop kept on. "—skydiving and port security, that sort of thing. Drugs and explosives."

"Explosives," one of the Australians cooed. "Cool."

"Think of me as a real-world James Bond," the cop continued. "But tougher."

"Tougher than Bond?"

On Evan's other side, the footballers shouted "*Skál!*" and slammed their shot glasses together, licking puddled ice and vodka from their palms. An older man escorted his wife past the rowdy crew, drawing jeers. The biggest of the foursome, red-faced and sloppy, smacked the husband on the shoulder, sending him tumbling toward the door.

That drew even more of Evan's attention.

The big man wore suspenders, ideal for grappling leverage. Another sported a convenient wrist cast; Evan always liked when a loudmouth came packaged with his own bludgeon. The man who'd stolen Evan's shot had a flat metal lip stud the size of a quarter, with a rune stamped on it; Evan hadn't brushed up on his Icelandic runes in a few decades, but he believed that it was the symbol for protection in battle. And the fourth man sported glasses with solid titanium frames, ideal for denting the delicate flesh around the eye sockets.

Smashed between the two groups, Evan hunkered further into himself and took another sip. He loved drinking.

But not drinkers.

"What was the funniest thing you ever saw on the job?" The Australians gathered closer around the cop now, indulging him.

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“When my partner, Rafn, accidentally shot himself in the foot while he was taking a leak. Right through the top of his boot!”

Laughter. The next round of drinks arrived for the ladies—a vomitous concoction sugared up with pink grapefruit, elderflower cordial, soda, and topped with a cherry tomato. It looked like a salad in a glass.

The banter continued. “And what was the *scariest* thing you saw?”

The venerable cop ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “Well, I could tell you. But then . . .”

As the Australians laughed and pleaded with him, Evan closed his eyes and sampled the specialty Reyka once more. It was unreasonably smooth, the finish short, leaving a lingering hint of spicy cedar.

He admired vodka. Base elements put through a rigorous process, distilled and filtered until the result was transformed into its purest essence.

As a scrawny boy, Evan had undergone a similar process himself. Hand-to-hand, network intrusion, *escrima* knife fighting, psy-ops, SERE tactics—he’d endured painstaking training to become something more than his humble origins would have suggested he could be.

As Jack used to tell him, *A diamond’s just a lump of coal that knows how to deal with pressure.*

In a show of aggressive amusement, one of the footballers pounded his fist into the bar, sending a glass ashtray flipping up past Evan’s cheek. It shattered at the ground near his boots.

He ignored them. Instinct drove him to peek at the RoamZone, the high-tech, high-security phone that traveled with him everywhere. After he intervened on someone’s behalf as the Nowhere Man, the only payment he requested was that that person pass on his untraceable phone number—1-855-2-NOWHERE—to someone else in need of help. He never knew when the line might ring, what sort of life-or-death predicament the caller might be in, or what he’d be required to do in order to help. The only constant was the first question he asked every time he picked up: *Do you need my help?*

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The rugged phone showed no missed calls.

To his left, the cop was warming to the fresh story. “. . . know of the geothermal pools?”

“Of course! The natural springs. We just came from the Blue Lagoon. Omigod, the color! And the mist.”

“Well, there’s a lesser-known spa an hour east of Akureyri. We pride ourselves on low crime here, but an enterprise was taking advantage of our goodwill, using us as a transport from the EU to North America. Meth. Significant loads out of Dresden.”

Evan hunched over the bar, curled the shot glass in tighter, the icy curve tacky against his palm.

“So we get called to a lava field in Mývatn at dusk. Steam thick like curtains. Water churning, heated from below. Heartbreakingly beautiful.” The former cop paused a moment. “That glacial blue, a color you can’t believe God can make. We get there and . . .”

The young women leaned closer. “And?”

“Floating like a stroke of paint in that blue, blue water was a ribbon of crimson thick as my arm. I waded in after it. Sloshing along, following the blood like a shark. And then I saw it. Bobbing against a wall of lava. Waterlogged. Head at an angle that made no anatomical sense.” The cop tented his fingertips on the surface of the bar. “The garrote had worked its way through most of the neck. Guy must’ve put up a helluva struggle.”

“Who was he?” one of the Australians asked breathlessly.

“German drug lord. The one who’d set up the operation.”

“So who . . . who killed him?”

On Evan’s other side, the footballers were stomping their feet now and chanting a drinking song. But his ear was tuned to the tale being spun by the onetime member of Sérsveit Ríkislögreglustjórans.

“Do you believe in fairy tales?” the cop asked.

The women stared at him glassy-eyed.

“There was a government assassin known as Orphan X,” he continued. “Think of him as the Big Bad Wolf. Probably American, maybe British. No one knew who he was. No one ever found out. Maybe he didn’t even exist. Maybe he was just a name they

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whispered to bad men to make sure they didn't sleep well at night."

"Do *you* think he was real?"

"I saw his handiwork."

"The dead German drug lord?"

"And five of his colleagues, found in various states of disassembly in a barn at the foot of the Námafjall Mountains. Their stash house. The carnage . . ." The cop shook his head. "Matched our national death rate from the preceding decade. No one saw the assassin come or go. No footprints, no tire tracks, no eyewitnesses. They say that's how he earned his nickname. His *other* nickname."

"What's that?" The Australians were captive now, leaning in, twirling straws in their drinks.

"'The Nowhere Man.' It's said that he left the world of spycraft. But he's still around. In the shadows."

"That's not true," one of the women said. "That can't be true."

"He has a secret phone number. Or so the story goes. The number gets passed around, and when you call it, he answers, 'Can I help you?'"

Evan shook his head. Barely.

The retired cop keyed to him. "What?"

"'Can I help you?'" Evan repeated. "That sounds . . . servile."

"This man is anything but," the cop said.

"I'd imagine he'd say something more muscular," Evan offered. "Like, 'Do you need my help?'"

"Well, whatever he says, he's not someone you want on your tail."

"What's he look like?" another of the young women asked.

"Like not much," the cop said, happily directing his attention back to the clique. "There's scant intel on him. Ordinary size, ordinary build. Just an average guy, not too good-looking."

The women were breathless.

The cop pressed on. "He goes anywhere, they say. Capable of anything. Scared of nothing."

"No one is scared of nothing," Evan said.

The cop fixed him with an irritated glance. "What's a tourist

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like you know of a man like that? A man who's killed drug dealers, terrorists, heads of state? I've seen with my own two eyes the wreckage he's left behind."

Evan shrugged. Flagged the bartender for another pour. It would be his last. He had a long, teeth-rattling drive back to the capital and a longer flight from there.

The cop cupped his hands and blew into them. "They say he's walked straight into the headquarters of some of the most fearsome men alive. Outnumbered twenty to one. And when they sneer at him, he doesn't bat an eye. He just stares at them and says . . ." The theatrical pause overstayed its welcome. "'Do I look like I'm someone who you can frighten?'"

Evan nearly choked on his sip of Reyka.

The cop wheeled to him on his stool. "What *now*?"

Evan wiped his mouth. "It's just . . . It's not very pithy."

"Okay, Mr. American Loudmouth. What do *you* think he'd say?"

Before Evan could reply, the footballer with the pierced lip bellowed something into his friend's ear, then leaned over and swiped a glass from the hand of the nearest Australian woman. He poured it down his tree-trunk throat and smashed the glass on the floor, roaring until cords stood out in his neck.

Evan swiveled on his barstool to face the foursome. "Now," he said, "you're starting to test my patience."

The man looked down at him. "We wouldn't want to test your patience." His voice was hoarse from alcohol. He placed a hand on Evan's shoulder. Squeezed. "Whatever should I do?"

"Apologize to her," Evan said. "That would be fine."

The man laughed a desiccated laugh.

His friends spread out behind him, kicking the barstools away to clear room.

Evan sighed. Extended his shot glass to the cop. "Hold my vodka."

Surprised, the cop took it, his mouth slightly ajar.

Resting his hands on the bar, Evan leaned to the Australian women. "Will you excuse me a moment?"

In his peripheral vision, he took in the footballers, assessing the props at his disposal.

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The red suspenders were heavy-duty elastic with metal clips.

Titanium eyeglasses far enough down on the bridge of the nose to punch right through the cartilage.

Wrist cast hovering in a low guard, one spin kick away from smacking up into the waiting jaw.

Evan felt the grip on his shoulder tighten.

He kept his gaze on the union of his hands set at the edge of the bar. Sensing the space around him.

Half-empty bottle arm's length away by the beer taps.

Stool beneath him, sturdy construction, legs sufficiently thick for jabbing.

A slick of spilled booze on the floor just beyond the heels of the man crowding his space.

"I know you think you're big," Evan said quietly. "And having numbers and being on your home turf makes you confident."

He stood up.

Behind him one of the Australians gave a nervous titter and the cop sucked in a sharp intake of air.

"But I want you to look at me." Evan lifted his gaze to meet the man's stare, sliding his right foot back ever so slightly to set his base. "Look at me closely. And ask yourself . . ."

He assessed the man looming over him, that rune stud floating on his chin like a soul patch. Beckoning.

Evan said, "Do I look scared?"

The flight attendant paused by Evan's aisle seat with the drink cart. Earlier he'd requested a bag of ice to apply to his knuckles.

She mustered a pert if tired smile. "Get you something?"

"What vodkas do you have?"

She listed them.

Evan said, "Water's fine, thank you."

As she poured, an announcement came over the speakers that in forty minutes they'd begin their twilight descent to LAX. She set the drink on his tray, which, to the consternation of his seat-mate, he'd scrubbed vigorously with an antibacterial wipe.

The flight attendant chinned at the pouch of mostly melted ice pressed against his hand. "Take that for you?"

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Evan removed the dripping bag, revealing a wicked bruise across the knuckles of the ring and middle fingers of his left hand. Through a surrounding swell of yellow-blue, a spray of broken blood vessels formed an imperfect snowflake pattern. As he passed her the ice bag, her eyes snagged on the painful marks.

“Goodness, that looks awful. What is it?”

“I believe,” he said, “it’s the Icelandic rune for protection in battle.”

2

All That Annoying Zen Shit

A few minutes prior to midnight on the royal-blue padding of a training mat, Evan was on his hands and knees, holding tabletop position. Shoulders directly over wrists, hips over knees, all joints at a clean ninety degrees. But one thing was different. His palms, placed down on the mat, were spun all the way around so his fingers pointed straight back toward his knees.

It looked bizarre, grotesque, as if someone had snapped his hands off and put them back on facing the wrong direction.

The stretch through his forearms, which had absorbed the shock from a number of well-placed punches in Langjökull, took on a biblical level of intensity.

He held the stretch in the quiet of his penthouse, 21A of the Castle Heights Residential Tower. His neck was sore, too. Bar fighters—especially the big ones—tended to go for headlocks, not understanding that that put you inside their guard with easy access to the groin, the stomach, the tender inner arch of the foot. Exhaling, Evan pulled his hips back another few millimeters, the

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fascia of his arms tugging more intensely around muscle and nerve fibers.

He'd forgotten to breathe again. He centered himself here, in this spot on the planet, a seven-thousand-square-foot modern wonderland of poured concrete and stainless-steel fixtures, as sparse and cold as the Scandinavian terrain he'd traversed just hours before.

There were workout stations and motion-detection hardware. There were floor-to-ceiling bullet-resistant windows and retractable discreet-armor security sunscreens. There was a vodka freezer vault and a Vault of a different nature hidden behind the shower in the master suite. There was a floating bed held three feet off the floor by herculean magnets, and an aloe vera plant named Vera III who thrived on neglect. There was a mounted katana sword and a vertical garden fed by drip irrigation. There was a disco ball and a Velcro wall with compatible body suits for jumping and sticking.

The latter two were a long story.

The ache in his arms gave way to numb tingling, then pins-and-needles lactic-acid release, and then finally surrender. He breathed in the quiet. The air-conditioning here stayed pegged at a cool sixty-six degrees, the freestanding fireplace at rest. As was his habit, he'd already burned the outfit he'd worn on the outing and re-appareled himself in identical clothes. He liked the cold, the silence, the lack of external stimuli. Everything here felt frozen and sterile and safe, like an ice crypt in which he could rest for vampiric rejuvenation.

Since he'd fled the Orphan Program, he'd led a purgatorial existence as the Nowhere Man. With virtually unlimited financial resources and a stellar capacity to enact freelance retribution on behalf of others, he made sure to use his skills in keeping with the Ten Commandments handed down to him by Jack, a set of rules to ensure that he stayed operationally sound.

Given the past missions he'd conducted as Orphan X, he was considered a dangerous asset by those at the highest levels of the United States government. He'd been granted an informal presidential pardon contingent upon his ceasing all extracurricular activities as the Nowhere Man.

He hadn't been very good at ceasing all extracurricular activities.

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But he remained in the clear as long as no one found out. Not State, not NSA. Not CIA or FBI. Not Secret Service Special Agent in Charge Naomi Templeton, who'd pursued him relentlessly as her job demanded. Not President Victoria Donahue-Carr, who had herself set the terms of his unofficial clemency.

As long as the RoamZone stayed quiet, he wouldn't have to worry. He could just relax here, take a bit of a break, and make sure—

The RoamZone rang.

Evan released his hands, sat back on his heels, and flapped his hands a few times as the aching subsided.

The caller ID showed nothing.

Curious.

He answered as he always did. "Do you need my help?"

A slight delay as the call routed around the globe through more than a dozen software virtual-telephone-switch destinations.

Then the sound of sobbing.

Answering the phone as the Nowhere Man, he was accustomed to that. He often spoke to people at their worst moment of desperation.

He waited.

And then he recognized who was crying.

Joey Morales.

After she'd washed out of the Orphan Program, he'd been put in a position where, against all his wishes and his protocols as a solitary operator, he'd had to rescue her. In a manner of speaking, she'd rescued him, too. An unlikely familial bond forged between teenage hacker and adult assassin that puzzled him still. Before her he hadn't understood the fierceness of affection. The vulnerability of it, too, how someone else's pain could hurt worse than your own.

He hadn't been trained to consider other people's pain. He'd been taught to barely register his own.

He stopped the rush of questions—*What happened? Did someone hurt you? Who do I need to maim?*—and forced himself to wait.

The Fifth Commandment: *If you don't know what to do, do nothing.* "Okay," he said. "All right."

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Joey kept on weeping, soul-rending cries giving way to what sounded like a panic attack—jerky inhalations, rushed exhalations.

Somehow she forced out a half-formed plea. “Make it su-stop.”

“I’m going to breathe,” he said quietly. “And you match me. Okay?”

“... k-kay.”

He breathed audibly, slowly. At first they were out of sync, but slowly she started to calm to the rhythm of his respiration.

“Bottom out your exhalations,” he told her. “Twice as long.”

“I *am!*”

“No. Listen.” He modeled it. “Making room for more oxygen.”

It took five full minutes for her to mirror his breathing. Then they held the cadence for another two.

Finally he asked, “What happened?”

The RoamZone had a variety of features—a self-repairing screen, nanotech batteries, an antigravity suction case. It could also prop open a broken window. He thumbed on the holographic display and watched Joey’s words dance as the RoamZone threw her voice.

“Nothing,” she said. “Everything doesn’t always have to be a *thing*, X.”

He’d set her sound waves to orange so they flickered like a flame. It was all he had of her right now.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“A little motel outside of Phoenix.”

It didn’t surprise him that her improvised road trip had wound up in Arizona. Or that panic had overtaken her there. Before her beloved maunt—her mom-aunt—had passed, Joey had lived with her there for the first innocent, uncomplicated decade of her childhood. And then had come the foster homes. And her brief stint in Orphan training. Neither of which was innocent. Nor uncomplicated.

“Know what she used to say? My maunt? When I did something funny, she’d say, ‘I’ve created a monster.’ And I’d love that, because it meant she was proud I’d taken the best parts of her. She was so, so funny. No matter what kind of shit we were going through. And—” She cut off with a sharp intake of air.

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Joey hated crying, fought it all the way through.

Evan gave her time. There was nothing else to give her.

Her voice trembled slightly but did not threaten to break. "She was the only person who was there when I came into the world, the last connection to . . . dunno, *me*. Little me. Riding her shoulders, birthday cakes, all that. You know?"

The only responses Evan could think of were trite and dismissive.

He heard a slurping sound—Dog licking Joey's salty face. Evan had rescued the Rhodesian ridgeback as a puppy from a dogfighting ring and given him to Joey. She'd refused to name him properly, not wanting to grow attached, and by the time they'd become inseparable, the name had stuck.

Evan listened carefully, his senses on high alert. One of the goals of the meditation he practiced was to experience everything as if it were happening for the first time. Because everything always was.

"It just . . . came on," Joey said. "All this *stuff*. Gawd, feelings suck. And they're all up in my face. Like, I got sad today at an old man sitting alone at a bus stop. He had a little hat and everything." A pause. "Come on, Dog. Let's get some water." She made a faint groan as she rose.

Evan zeroed in on the noise. "Why are you groaning?"

"I'm not *groaning*, X. Jesus. I made a delicate feminine exhale."

"Why?"

"Nothing. I'm just tight in my hip."

He closed his eyes, focusing. "Ache in the front of the socket?"

A longer pause now. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Did you get scared today? Something startle you?"

"No," she said, with readily accessible teen irritation. "I didn't get—"

Some epiphany made her cut off. He gave her the silence.

"Well, some dipshit in a Volvo almost hit me earlier," she conceded. "At an intersection. But, you know, I'm a trained tactical driver so it's not like I was *scared*."

He waited.

"But maybe I tensed up. For, like, a femtosecond."

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He waited some more.

"Why? Why'd you ask that?"

"The psoas is the first muscle to engage when you go into fight or flight. You know how to release it?"

"Of course I know how to release my psoas. I'm not an *amateur*."

Abrasive noises as the phone got tossed down. He waited while she grunted and shuffled around. Then he heard her breathing turn jagged, move to shuddering releases, and then finally even out.

When she picked up the phone again, her voice was much more subdued. She sounded exhausted, wrung out. "Can't I just, like, not deal with any of this?" she asked. "Emotions or whatever."

She was generally so energized and caffeinated that he relished these softer moments with her, even over the phone. He pictured her big smile that put a dimple in her right cheek. Those translucent emerald eyes, pure as gemstones. The tousel of black-brown hair heaped to one side to show off the shaved strip above her right ear.

He knew she was sleepy now, could hear it in her voice, how the words got slower, her upper eyelids heavying the way they did. She'd be curled up on the bed right now with the hundred-and-ten-pound ridgeback, winding herself into a cocoon. He knew that phase. The chrysalis when everything puddled together, formless and hopeless, a primordial reset before new structure and meaning took hold.

He said, "Sure."

"Then what?"

"You won't feel as much . . ."

"I choose *that* one."

". . . of anything."

A pause.

He said, "'How you do anything is how you do everything.'"

"Don't give me all that annoying Zen shit. The Commandments are only about training."

He said, "Right."

A long silence.

"Part of why I left was to . . . dunno, find myself. I know, sounds stupid. But what if there's nothing new to find?"

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"Meaning what?"

"I mean, I was trained as an Orphan even if I never finished. But what if that's all I *can* do? What if I'm really supposed to be a killer li—"

She halted, but he knew where her words had been headed: *like you*.

"I get it," she continued, regrouping. "I'm just sixteen. But I'm also, like, *way* more badass than the majority of so-called adults. Did they make Mozart wait till he was eighteen to let him play the piano?"

"He wasn't killing anyone with his sonatas."

"That's not the point."

"There are places that you can't get back from."

"You've gone there. Why shouldn't I?"

"The cost," he said.

This silence was even longer.

"I'm so screwed up right now, X. Just fucking *damaged*. All the time."

"The wound is the place where the light enters you."

"Snappy. You come up with that on the spot?"

"Nah, a thirteenth-century Muslim poet. It's been kicking around about a thousand years."

"What's it mean?"

"Poetry never *means* something. It evokes."

"Fine. What's it *evoke*?"

"If I could describe it, it wouldn't be poetry."

"Super helpful. So, like, what am I supposed to do?"

"Either let it go," he said, "or you sink with it."

"The pain?"

"No."

"What then?"

"The notion that the pain makes you unique."

Her words were growing slower, drawing out. "Kay. What happens then?"

"I don't know. I haven't gotten that far yet. But maybe it illuminates—"

"What?"

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"What's *actually* unique about you."

"So what's *actually* unique about me?"

"From what I've seen so far? Your ability to eat enormous quantities of Red Vines."

"You're the worst." On the verge of sleep, her drawl intensifying.

"You're the worst, too."

"Night, X."

"Night, Josephine."