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David Coyle

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Chapter One
THE GIRL

It was hot in New York – June, 2014.

On the north edge of Brooklyn, in Greenpoint, a man sat on a pier watching the East River flow by. Ships went under famous bridges. In the shadow of Manhattan, as the sun set over Destiny’s manifestation, as the Empire State stood – just tall enough to remain in glow – Lincoln watched.

“It’s a massive circuit board, we’ve built ourselves a massive circuit board”, he thought to himself, “The buildings, they’re the transistors – the resistors. The cars and the trains, they’re the electricity. The roads and railroads act as wires, bands of copper and fibers – connectivity. Are we the information? What of the animals? What of the East River? Is it all a machine? Or are our cities viruses – rust? What are we? Why am I here?”

Lincoln severed this line of introspection. Not because he didn’t like where it was going, but because he had already been there many times before.

“Existentialism...” he muttered under his breath, almost as a sigh, almost as a joke. Lincoln was neither a young man nor an old one. He was neither shockingly handsome, nor offensive to the eye. His hair was messy. His eyes were green without envy. He hadn’t shaved in eight days, but of course he hadn’t counted. His face was slightly crooked too, most unlike his desires.

“The centre of the machine”, Lincoln thought, “I’m in the grand centre of the machine. This really is the capital of the world. The motherboard can’t be denied its

crown, made of Rockefellers and Chryslers. If reality is our realm, Manhattan is the throne...”

The amateur philosophy blew away, caught in a lone soft breeze. Wearing jeans and a t-shirt, Lincoln was usually as unassuming as he appeared. The soles of his shoes were a clue to the lifestyle he led. They were worn thin, meaning he was either fond of old shoes, poor, or he walked a lot. His jeans were clean black, though, and the t-shirt clean white. He wasn't poor. Someone watching him closely might have concluded he was sentimental or a wanderer... if they're even different things.

Further down the river were the Williamsburg hipsters, but Greenpoint had held onto its blue-collar origins – making it more hipster. Such was the scene that neither Lincoln nor the elderly fisherman sitting nearby looked out of place. Lincoln gave the man a staunch ‘hello’ nod.

“I’m just trying to kill a bit of time”, the fisherman said after making of eye-contact.

“Connections”, Lincoln thought.

“Caught anything?” he then asked.

“Not a damn thing”, the true-blue Brooklyn dude said, turning back to the East River and the Midtown ridge-line of glass and steel. Lincoln assumed this meant the conversation was over. He liked the fisherman’s style.

Truth was, they were both on the dockyards to kill time. Lincoln was waiting for 8.30pm. A nearby brothel had told him Edie would be free then. After sleeping with a few prostitutes, he had found Edie – fallen for Edie. He had formed a connection, a fool’s mistake. This would be his first visit sober.

It was 8.20pm. The high southern face of the Empire State basked in the distant sun. A young couple, tourists it seemed, were walking along the pier. They stood in awe of the city and its lights, the view of their dreams. Lincoln got to his feet and began to leave, turning his back on the most amazing sight they’d ever seen. Part of him felt bad for abandoning the fisherman to the fate of having to take a picture of them, but it was

more or less time to go and their love for each other was making Lincoln resentful. He didn't want to be resentful, so he left.

Passing through the backstreets of Greenpoint, by brick warehouses used and not, through vast car yards sparsely populated by tough men and stray cats, Lincoln ended up at Edie's block. Broken windows on buildings fit the scene. The colorful street art that laced Brooklyn and Greenpoint was noticeably absent from this street.

Broken chain linked fences enclosed empty lots of stone and weeds. Crime would feel comfortable here, almost apt or expected. Hands in his pockets, Lincoln strolled as casually as possible up the stone steps of a nondescript house amongst a row of others. Some had overgrown gardens out front and some had trash cans, this one had nothing.

Lincoln checked the street was void of cars and people. Humbled by a sense of humiliation, he pressed the buzzer on the door. He watched ants walk along the ground before the brothel door opened with a click.

Stepping inside, the scent hit him instantly, the incense smelling like the idea of South America. Climbing the stairs which were draped in black carpet, he came to another door that was slightly ajar. On it was a black poster which simply read 'FUCK' in bold white letters. Through the door, in a dimly lit room, sat Lola – a girl of haunting eyes and darkness. She was beautiful but cold, despite the smile on her face.

"Hey, sweetie, how are you?" she asked. She was so lush in look.

"Is Edie ready?" was all Lincoln replied with, his eyes darting to Lola's and then falling down to the floor.

"She's just getting ready for you, honey. You wanna drink?" Lola asked, all sugary.

"No, thanks."

"Okay, well, that'll just be one-fifty."

Hands already nervously in his pockets, Lincoln grabbed his wallet and plucked out the presidents he needed. He hated seeing pictures of his namesake while not living up to his example, which happened a lot. He handed over some of America's finest men.

“She’ll be out when she’s ready, sweetie”, Lola smiled. Her eye contact proved too overwhelming for Lincoln to remain locked into.

“Thanks”, he said quickly, turning to sit on a sofa. The paint on the walls was shabby – the incense that drifted through the air had seeped into it over the years this place had gone unknown unto the law. Some dreadful modern pop music played quietly beneath this veil of sweet smells. Lincoln had no idea how many people were in the building other than Lola, Edie and himself. If there were more customers with girls, they were quiet. He looked at the clock sitting by Lola – 8.29pm. That second, a door opened, making Lola and Lincoln both look up. Standing in a doorway, that lead to a hallway of love nests, was Edie.

Her hair was a classy black bob – chic – and her eyes a mesmerizing blue, her frame petite but curvy, accentuated by fine lingerie and a transparent robe. Lincoln’s heart skipped a beat and then several more. Edie was a woman, a fantasy. She had grace and sass and hurt in the perfect combination. Lincoln wanted to hold her and never let her go. He wanted to sleep near her. He wanted to marry her. The softness of her skin... The effortlessness of her smile...

“Hey”, was all she said, her voice of roses sounding across the room. She extended her hand, making her thin, see-through robe lift higher up her arm, revealing more of her soft white skin. Shifting slightly on her stilettos, she waited for Lincoln to come to her. He wanted to rush at her with lust but was too afraid of breaking her gentleness.

Offering her a weak smile of genuine kindness, he stood, walked over and took her hand. Rather, she took his. From the harshness of his world, Edie offered him refuge in the warmth and subtleness of the palm of her hand. Lola gave him a tacky wink as Edie lured him away down the hall.

The door shut behind them and the dreadful music was quietened a little, creating a false sense of privacy. It was this feeling that made Edie turn to Lincoln with a wry smile.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t be coming back?” she said with a wry shine in her eye. Lincoln exhaled a bashful chuckle, “Yeah...”

His sentence trailed off like they did down the hall. Stopping outside her door, Edie turned on the spot with a wee bounce.

“Well, I’m glad you did”, she said, biting her bottom lip and opening the door, “It doesn’t feel like work when you’re here.” Her disingenuous affection both broke Lincoln’s heart and melted it.

A double bed lay in the room behind the door, however, it was without a duvet or sheets, just a fresh mattress cover, a stack of which sat in the corner of the room.

“A metaphor”, Lincoln thought, “For the type of relationship ours is.” Black curtains were pulled, shutting Greenpoint out. Only a string of faint fairy lights strung around the bedhead provided any light. Edie’s room also had that hypnotic aroma of false love, incense slowly burning on a small wooden table. The white smoke lingered in the air. The walls were painted in a very dark purple, the carpet matched. This was not a lovers’ sanctuary. Lincoln stood there silently, anxiously recalling these details of Edie’s room.

“Now, what’s the matter with you?” she asked, curious of his demeanor.

“Hey, ah... ah...”

“You really are shy tonight, how come?” she asked, intending no innuendo.

“We can just sit?”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

They sat on the bed, her: dressed like a bird of paradise, and he: dressed like a bum.

“Did you wanna talk about something?” asked Edie.

“Na... Maybe we just sit here? I dunno.”

Edie took care of Lincoln’s awkwardness with a kiss. As soon as their lips touched, the falseness of their deeds began to fade. Whatever had been on Lincoln’s mind fell away, nonetheless for the moment. With the tenderness of real love, they undressed their

bodies before undressing their souls. They swam in the senses of the flesh. Skin and mouths. Hair. Eyelashes. Soft bites. Edie forgot she was working. Lincoln forgot he wasn't dead. Warm breaths were felt. They played as weak and strong, as woman or man interchanged in lust and passion. From places they didn't know existed, they fell into each other. Two drowning souls willingly submerged.

Just when the romance seemed to form, with all the ache of such a thing, a knock at the door shook them.

"Hour's nearly up, Edie", Lola called from the hall. It was like the lights were suddenly turned on and they could now see each other naked. The warmth between them chilled. They seemed aghast that an hour could pass by in a latex-shrouded instant. The pair slowed to lie for their remaining time, not knowing how much they had. Through exhaustion and softened vision, Edie spoke a rare genuine whisper, "Thank-you."

Lincoln looked to her, her head resting on his arm, "For what?"

He didn't understand her, he didn't know how awful her days were.

"Nothing", she said, slightly regretting opening her heart. Then, like a gust of cold wind, the regrets and worries of their pasts returned to them.

"I should probably get going", he said, pulling away from her and getting up to get dressed. Edie remained still, hurting though she was, unashamed of her body. She studied Lincoln for a moment.

"Who are you?" she then asked.

"Nobody."

"Do you at least have a name?"

"Have I never told you?"

"You've come here three times now. This is the only time sober. All you've ever said is that you were married but not anymore."

"I mentioned my divorce?"

“Sorta... but you haven’t said much else.”

“Sorry, last thing you need is for drunks to treat you like a councillor as well.”

Eddie sought to lift the mood, “As well? As well as what?”

Lincoln needed to say ‘meat’ or ‘an object’ but didn’t want to. He knew Eddie knew this. He felt terrible for making her look sad.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you”, he apologized hastily. Eddie found this meekness adorable.

“Aw, baby, I’m just messing with you. You know, like the whole ‘I’m funny how?’ thing from that movie?” she said. Finding the joke funny but the situation heavy, Lincoln offered a weak smile. Reaching for her robe, Eddie added, “If I got so easily offended I wouldn’t last a day in this job.”

Lincoln didn’t know what to say, Eddie did though, “So, what’s your name?”

“What’s your name?”

“You know my name.”

“Yeah, but what’s your real name?” Lincoln asked. Eddie grinned, sitting herself next to him as he did his laces.

“Eddie *is* my real name.”

“Oh...”

“My parents were stupid hippies. You know that Eddie Sedgwick? Yeah. I’ll show you my driver’s licence next time if you don’t believe me.”

“There won’t be a next time”, Lincoln said, a little angrily.

With her posture not convinced of this, her speech wasn’t convincing either, “Right...”

“Wait, remind me, who’s being exploited here?” Lincoln said coldly. Eddie, who really had hadn’t meant any offence, was genuinely hurt. Lincoln knew he alone had soured things and quickly changed tone.

“Sorry... My name is Lincoln. It’s a stupid name, I hate it. Named after the president who freed the slaves – it’s super corny.”

Still sore, Edie looked for a way to let it show, “I know who freed the fucking slaves.” Thinking of ways to apologize, Lincoln suddenly remembered he hadn’t paid for an argument. He got to his feet and fired what he thought would be a nasty final shot, “Maybe he didn’t free them? I mean, look at you...”

Walking to the door, however, his ears soon bled with Edie’s parting words, “You cried last time you were here. You cried and you told me that if you could just find the perfect words in the perfect order then you’d get your wife back. Well, good luck with that. See you next time, you fucking asshole.”

Lincoln didn’t turn around or close the door, he just kept walking down the hall. What Edie said reminded him of something he had remembered to forget: any notion of getting his ex-wife/ex-life back. In a single sentence of spit, Edie had reconstructed a bridge Lincoln had spent years trying to burn down. Hope.

“There is nothing more humiliating than the mocking promise of hope”, he thought.

“Bye, honey”, Lola said as Lincoln left in a shameful hurry. He didn’t acknowledge her, he hated her ‘honey’. Honey and hope.

Chapter Two
NEW YORK IS DEAD

Lincoln travelled on the E-line. He overlooked an old man sitting down reading. He couldn't see what the book was called, but he caught the start of a chapter:

“As the sun shines in New York City, as it shines in Paris, and Tokyo, so too does it shine in Pyongyang – for although everyone is warmed by the same sun, we are made cold by very different worlds.”

The next line read:

“Ahh! A giant pear!”

Lincoln was disappointed by this, the first passage had been so sincere, only for it to be followed by something so deliberately whimsical.

The train was full of people, lots were reading. Some sat and some stood, holding bars above their heads, cunning commercials for deodorants and vacations posted around. Lincoln planned to get off at the next stop, the crowded carriage was getting to him. It didn't matter where he got off as he wasn't really going anywhere. Sliding underneath the New York metropolis had become his pastime.

“The next stop will be: fifth avenue, fifty-third street”, the automated voice announced over the train.

“Midtown? Not ideal... the Park might be cool”, he thought. Part of the reason he rode these hurtling aluminum cans was because there was air-conditioning on board. The city above was sweltering in the June heat.

The train screeched to a halt and Lincoln was the first off. He dodged the crowd as he had many times before and made his way to the surface. Ascending, the heat began to hit him. However, what struck him more was a sad, grotesque sight. There was a man, of color, holding a cardboard sign. It read a horrendous thing but paled in significance to his state: his eyes were falling out of their sockets, like those who chose to truly see him, and his pathetic plea read, “Problem, Please Help.”

This man could not see, presumably, hopefully, those who walked past and did not help – his eyes were falling out of his damned skull!

“There are apparently, a newspaper said, over a hundred billionaires in this city, yet this man stands before us all with his eyes contradicting his soul in a state of helpless waste”, Lincoln thought as he walked by.

“I’m so sorry, man”, was all Lincoln gave him, even though he had cash and coins in his pocket. What struck him worse still than the human decay, although monstrous, was the busker. He, this busker of talent-learned, played a song by John Lennon, murdered in this city. It was *Free As A Bird*, played near the man of melting eye. It hurt Lincoln, though he gave no money to either of them, that the music man had more donated crumbs of coin than the sick man. Thyroid does not entertain. Nor does it make light of your day. The song of a dead man replayed, however, as opposed to the plea of one dying, was worth more in the Capital of Humanity.

“Sick, we make me sick”, Lincoln thought. He wanted to give his all to the sick man, but he didn’t give anything other than these thoughts. He was probably like the others; caught in their rush of life and hoping for a miracle in human form to swoop in and singlehandedly save this man.

“Just make it to the surface”, he caught himself thinking, as if there would be air up there and not this human flood of which he felt he was drowning in, “Just make it to the surface.”

5th Avenue/53rd Street.

“Good God. The scene”, he thought. The streets were full with humans.

“All the animals come out at night” – said Travis Bickle – yet here they were in broad daylight. Millions of them.

“What happened to the simple cave dweller that sought only tomorrow?” Lincoln wondered. His thoughts were making more and more sense to himself, unnerving him. iPods and iPads and iPhones and even things without i were everywhere. Lincoln would’ve screamed, but screams were always swamped in the numbered streets.

“Everything has been heard by New York before”, he thought.

“Nothing is new except New York”, he then said aloud, heard only by a few people who assumed he was insane. Midtown isn’t the place to make friends, unless you submit yourself and sanity. In such an instance, your friends are everywhere. They’ll come to you unwished, crosses on their faces, misunderstanding Christ.

“Christ means sacrifice”, they say, but they’ll make no mention of forgiveness. In cafes they’ll sit. On park benches they’ll wait... for nothing. For nobody. They’ll spit their God on people.

“Just get to the trees”, Lincoln thought. Ice-cold water was sold in the searing heat. Lincoln, though he had presidents in his pockets, was overheated and thirsty, and bought nothing. He couldn’t bear the heat long enough to stand in line. The people were everywhere.

“Find shade”, he thought. When he found a tree in Central Park, he whispered for nobody else to ever hear, “Shade.”

Did he fall asleep? Or did sleep fall? Whatever the case, he woke sometime later. Nothing was stolen because he had nothing to steal and the NYPD were everywhere. Going for an aimless walk, and finally buying some water under a shaded tree, Lincoln soon found himself not far away from the *Imagine* plaque in Strawberry Fields. John Lennon was so cool that he got a piece of the park. Having only walked past it once a

few years ago, Lincoln decided to check it out. An aged bluesman played *In My Life* acoustically as people stood around the peace plaque.

“If only...”, Lincoln thought.

Never once bothering to see the exact spot where John Lennon was shot, Lincoln’s curiosity took the better of him. As he approached the Dakota Building, he suddenly realized why he had previously avoided it. Tourists on foot and buses took photos of the scene of the crime. It was odd.

To Lincoln’s much-needed amusement, a cyclist rode their bike along the sidewalk.

“Get off the goddamn sidewalk!” someone shouted.

“Fuck you!” the cyclist shouted back.

“You’re a jerk!” another said.

“Bite me!”

Lincoln couldn’t help but smile at the circus. However, when this sideshow had ended, he was left wondering where to go and what to do next. He had been feeling like he had less and less purpose everyday. Suicide was routinely considered. He would probably do it too, if it didn’t require some effort. He wondered how long it would take to die if he just simply stopped doing anything.

“If I lay down right here, the same place Lennon did, just tucked myself away in a quiet spot of the street, out of the way, how long would I have to wait to die? Two or three days?” he wondered, “And would anyone even notice? How long would I be dead before they did?”

Scanning the streets, full of New Yorkers and cars and heat, looking for a place to test out these questions, he saw that people were already in all the best spots. Some of them moved slightly, but some really could be dead.

“How many people die penniless at the feet of these skyscrapers worth billions? These ivory towers surrounded by human bones”, he thought.

The extreme disparity that New York presented made Lincoln feel ill. He knew he was part of the problem – he spent money on prostitutes, not charity. In fact, he was perhaps even guiltier than others because he couldn't claim to be ignorant.

If it weren't for his ex-wife wanting nothing to do with him, he might've killed himself just to teach her a lesson. A lesson in what, exactly, he wasn't sure, but as she probably wouldn't hear about it for a long time, he saw little point in suicide. They didn't have any children together so she had been able to successfully cut all ties from him. She never answered her phone or replied to e-mails. Sometimes he wondered if she'd died. Whatever the story, he wasn't going to stalk a ghost.

Abandoning his dark fantasies, Lincoln decided to just get drunk somewhere in the Village. Snapping out of his daze, he saw the sun shine between the buildings, reminding him of the solar-system and the universe he was in.

Before he knew much else, he had ushered himself into a subway station. Under the street, in the dungeons of New York, he was swallowed by the heat. Police were loitering about in this heat. It would be unbearable if not for the promise of an air-conditioned carriage. Behind the yellow line, he waited to see the light at the end of the black tunnel. The E-train hurtled in, drowning out the buskers along the dusty platform. And heat. People melted.

“Who keeps this going?” Lincoln wondered, “Who owns this world?” Under the fluorescence and chill of the train, Lincoln studied the people around him. They were old, even the young. Flowing below New York, through life, through time. Lincoln wondered if any of them saw their own skulls as a thing of beauty.

Arriving at West Fourth Street – Washington Square, Lincoln stopped at a store, buying gin and nothing else, deciding to drink it straight. He paced around Greenwich Village for a while, checked out the weird scene. Down Bleecker Street, hipsters began singing with a ragtag band of old bluesmen. Lincoln wished the hipsters would shut up and just let the musicians play. On old guitars, these old men painted the street black with

their music. Lincoln closed his eyes and enjoyed their contagious rhythm. And his gin. He drank his poisonous water in swigs. Down at Father Demo Square, people hid in the shade of the trees, eating gelatos, enjoying the fountain's constant flow. A sad trombonist tromboned sadly. After three very poor songs and no pity donations, he packed up and left, as did Lincoln.

He crossed the Avenue of the Americas. His gin was warm and it burnt his throat. The disgusting heat of the afternoon just about killed him. Passing street basketball games, he made it to the grassy shade of Washington Square Park. There were business people, tourists, bums, street performers, locals, NYU students, dealers, hipsters, fags, queers, junkies, drunks, poets, posers, musicians – and chess players. Despite the signs telling people not to swim in the fountain, hundreds bathed in its water. Artists drew on the paths with chalk. Vendors sold cold drinks. People ate by Washington's Arch. Loners fed the squirrels.

“This is a good place to get drunk”, Lincoln thought. Wandering through the park, sipping his gin and slipping his mind, Lincoln soon sat where the chess players and weed dealers did their thing. Watching some games – saying “No thanks” to some dope – Lincoln was soon asked by a man if he wanted to play.

As Lincoln sat down, the man began to set up his pieces and asked, “What's your story, man?”

Lincoln didn't know what to say, “What?”

“Your life story, bro”, the man said, moving a pawn into the world, “What is it?”

Lincoln moved a knight and sat back a bit, “Really?”

“Really, man.”

Another pawn was moved. Pausing the game a moment, Lincoln thought where to begin his tale.

“Well... I was an only child. I never really had much ambition, you know. I was doing nothing until I enlisted in the Marines. But... my mother died while I was on my first

tour, my father died during my second and my wife left me after my third. No kids, no family, no real friends. I just kick it on my war savings. When that runs out, I'll sleep on the streets, I guess."

"Shit, man, that sounds like a rough deal. Thanks for serving our country", the man said before adding, "Your move."

They moved a few pawns and knights about before Lincoln asked, "And how about you? What's your story?"

"Well now, I grew up in Harlem. When I was a kid I got my legs broken real bad in a car accident. Never been able to use them properly since, you know, for working and whatever, so I learnt to play chess to supplement my welfare cheques, you know what I'm saying?"

"Oh, I didn't realize we were playing for money here, man."

"Shit, don't worry, man, I ain't gonna charge a veteran! I make enough dough from all them tourists."

"Oh, thanks", Lincoln said, swigging his gin and moving a bishop.

"Why you drinking for, man?" the man asked.

"Ah, I'm just miserable, you know?"

"Oh, yeah. We all miserable, son. But why today? What's happened to you today?" the man asked, taking Lincoln's bishop.

"You know, just shit gets to you... like, I sold my body to this country and I lost everything but my life in the process, then I saw the headlines of the newspapers today around the city and they're all saying that this ISIS group is over there killing women and children, cutting their heads off, taking over towns and cities that I saw friends die for, commit war crimes for... I don't know man, it just gets too heavy sometimes."

"Politics will make the happiest man alive wanna kill himself", the man said, having taken full control of the board in just a few swift moves, "But you can't worry yourself

about Bush and Obama and all them fools, man. You just gotta keep your own head above water. Otherwise, you won't be no good for anybody.”

Lincoln thought about this as he stared at his miniature army who were slowly collapsing before him.

“Yeah, I guess so”, he said with a sighing soul. He went to move another pawn before pausing, there was a question on his mind that he'd wanted to ask someone for a while, and he liked the wisdom this man seemed to have.

“You know, there's something I've always wondered about chess, I wonder if you'd know the answer?” he asked. The man chuckled, “Try me.”

“Alright, well, chess is a really old game, right? And for most of its history, women have had very few rights. So, I've always wondered if the queen, being the most powerful piece in the game, is a symbol that women should find empowering or condescending. What do you think?”

The man laughed, “Shit, son, I dunno. There are a lot of people out there who give up as soon as they lose their queen, you know? But she ain't the most powerful piece in the game. Ah-uh. Hell, the king ain't even the most powerful. The most powerful piece is the mind of the player. But to answer your question, hell, son, I dunno. Empowering or condescending? Guess it depends on the woman thinking about it. I mean, before my wife died – cancer – she always started on her own color! You know what I mean?”

“I'm so sorry about your wife.”

“Oh, yeah. Ten years ago now and I still talk about it, talk about her, use her as a frame of reference. You know, I find myself thinking, ‘Oh, I must show Odette this and that, tell her about this or whatever’, you know, then I remember – she dead. And unlike chess, you can't bring your queen back, man. Once they gone, they gone.”

“Yeah...” Lincoln sighed, thinking of his ex.

“I like you man, you seem to know what's up”, the man said before moving his rook into place, “Checkmate.”

Lincoln studied the board and accepted that he was indeed beaten.

“Good game, man”, he said, offering a handshake. Shaking Lincoln’s hand, the man spoke some potent words, “You know, man, I can tell you lost some things in your life. I can tell. But you gotta find what you got left. Whatever it is. Hell, maybe it’s me. Maybe you come here everyday and I beat your ass. Or, maybe it’s something else. Something you didn’t even think about before. Maybe it’s time. But if you just say the right things to the right people in the right place at the right time, you’ll be unstoppable, man. You know what I’m saying, dog?”

Lincoln’s brain, although swimming in booze, couldn’t quite believe the stuff it was hearing. This was the second time in as many days that he’d heard this notion; the right things, the right people, right place, right time.

“What is this all pointing towards?” he wondered, “The poverty, the wealth, chess, ISIS, that Edward Snowden guy, Wall Street, my ex-wife, nine-eleven, oil, war, booze, glorious booze, the man with his eyes falling out, billionaires everywhere, *Free As A Bird...*”

These names and ideas became chaos in his head and began to overwhelm him.

“Dog, you alright?” the man asked. He seemed genuinely concerned for Lincoln who had entered some kind of daze.

“The universe, love, trees, cars, nothing, everything, ice-cold drinks, slavery in India, East versus West, NATO, Fallujah, the Roman Empire, the East River, New York City, Greenpoint... Edie...” Lincoln’s mind raced. He no longer found himself to be the possessor of coherent thoughts, merely the temporary occupant of revelations, profound and of consequence.

“Yo, dog?” the man said again, eventually snapping Lincoln back to reality.

“Whoa, ah... sorry, man. I was just tripping out there for a second”, Lincoln said.

“No shit. About what?”

“About what you just said. Something about saying the right things to the right people...” Lincoln trailed off as he looked around the park at the students and bums and well-to-dos and the junkies and the buskers and the queers.

“Who do you think is the most powerful person in the world, man? Who runs this place? Who owns this show?” Lincoln then asked the man suddenly.

“Shit, man, I don’t know! The president? Queen of England? Jesus? They’d be my guesses. Hell, maybe it’s someone that ain’t nobody ever even heard of? A real silent cat, killer in the shadows. I dunno. You one buzzy dude, man.”

“Hey, sorry man, I gotta go. There’s someone I gotta go see”, Lincoln said, getting to his feet and motioning to leave. He stopped for a moment, however, to shake the man’s hand a second time.

“Thank-you”, Lincoln said. The man seemed confused about whatever Lincoln was up to, but thought it best not to ask.

“Be kind to yourself, man”, is all he said as Lincoln left the park through the gateway of blackened iron. Taking one last swig of his booze, Lincoln gave the rest to a decrepit soul limping through the street.

“Bless you”, the rotting human said as Lincoln pressed on. It had been years since he had felt adrenaline in his blood, a surge of purpose in his veins, some ambition in his heart. He felt like he was at war again. It quickened his pace. He was certain he wasn’t just drunk, in fact, if anything his inspiration had sobered him up.

“Oh my god!” he remembered, “This is what it feels like to be alive!”

For years, grey months of no distinction had sucked at Lincoln’s eyes. There had been nothing – *nothing* – motivating him to do anything. Everything had been overcast and pointless. For too long he had only felt either heat or cold. Now, however, there was electricity flowing through him. He could now see reason in going to sleep or waking up. What the man in the park, the chess master on welfare, what he had said to Lincoln was akin to handing him a key – the key to his life.

“The right things to the right people in the right place at the right time! It’s so obvious! Perfection of the mind. Why just try and get that miserable bitch to talk to you? So foolish! You’re a captured pawn, removed from the board, forget cuddling up to your old queen, take on the players of the game! Find the most powerful person on the face of the Earth – armed only with your mind.”

Barely realizing it, Lincoln dove back into the sidewalk, back into the furnace of the underground. He felt sweat on his neck and face and on his collar but the discomfort didn’t bother him – he had a purpose to all his troubles now.

“It’s so damn obvious! What else was I ever gonna do?! You’ve got the gift of the gab if you want it. You’ve hunted jihadist pricks in the desert, you’ve killed people, you’ve cut a throat, you can be ruthless and sharp like a blade, you be anything you damn want!”

Lincoln stood at the platform and saw a piece of graffiti written on a subway map – “New York Is Dead” – ironic as he now felt reborn. A train to Queens went by before making a screaming stop.

“Force your will and triumph”, he thought. In that daze in the park, when his mind raced with words, faster and faster and out of any sequence or pattern, an idea had been had of magnitude:

“The fastest way to the top of the world is via the underworld. Use the back door – get to Edie. She might have connections who have connections who have connections.”

He was headed to Edie’s place, but not to sleep with her, to ask her a question. He sped back up to Midtown before darting east. Leaving Manhattan, he got off at Court Square. Transferring from the E to G-line, he was soon flying south to Greenpoint.

Under the brick of Brooklyn, Lincoln re-emerged from the subway onto Nassau Avenue. Pacing around street corners familiar to him, he soon stood outside of Edie’s.

Chapter Three

U N T O T H E U N D E R G R O U N D

With the house of ill-fame looming before him, just twenty hours or so after it had the day before, Lincoln knew there was a dark time ahead. Edie would be scathing.

The mountain of power that he wished to climb began with the first few steps up to the front door. A deep breath helped him get ready for the storm ahead. He walked up the steps, looked once or twice over his shoulder and pressed the buzzer. The door came ajar with a click.

The aroma of lust dizzied his senses as he went inside. That thick air of slow persuasion, the allure of vice so tender and so good. Going up the stairs, he braced himself for Lola's sugary smile.

Pushing the 'FUCK'ing door open, he saw Lola sitting there, reading in hypnotic boredom, listening to gangsta rap. She looked up at him with a sultry smile.

"Edie pie?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, y'all in luck", she said, opening a book and revealing money in the pages, "Two-hundred, honey."

Her eyes burnt him as he got out cash from his wallet.

"More than usual?" he asked, handing her the money. She took the green gold, letting her skin touch his, gently electrocuting his body with sexual energy, enjoying being the predator – watching Lincoln squirm.

"Idiot", he thought of himself.

“Well, she’s got so popular, people pay good money”, Lola said, giving him change with another touch and closing the book, “She’s in her room.”

Lola had had her fun with him. She didn’t look at him, her dislike for him greater than her desire to toy with him further. He was like a used condom to her. A condom with a face. She didn’t care as he vanished down the hall of smoky love.

The black carpet and dim light seethed with vice. That intoxicating smell, so sweet compared to the pavement’s sweat outside. There was never anybody in the hallway, creating a hushed and unsettling vibe.

Knowing all too well the door hiding Edie, Lincoln walked over to it, ruffling his hair subconsciously in a way he had always felt made him look more handsome. He reached for the door handle before opting to knock first.

“Who is it?” the room asked in Edie’s knee-weakening voice.

“Ah... I don’t like my name”, Lincoln said. The door opened. Edie stood half naked in the doorway. Her skin a gorgeous hue of soft color like Mother Earth’s.

“Look who it is...” she said.

“Are you alone in there?”

“You were a real jerk last night.”

“I know”, he said as if their relationship was real.

“Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“You are so!”

“Okay, I’ve had a little bit, but Edie, I’m so sorry... Last night you joked about ‘next time’, well, there won’t be a ‘next time’, I mean, not like that at least.”

Slowly, she opened the door as a way of saying, “Apology accepted.”

“I don’t want to sleep with you, I just want to talk to you”, Lincoln said as he walked into the room. Edie rolled her eyes and lay on the bed, every man’s dream.

“What do you wanna talk about? Your mean old ex-wife?” she asked sarcastically.

“I said sorry for last night, can we go back to respecting each other?” he proposed.

“Um—”

“Last night”, he cut in, “I felt like there was something there between us.”

“Oh, god – are you asking me out?” she asked.

“I’m saying I think we shared something.”

“You spent two-hundred bucks to come and say that?”

Lincoln, expecting to act, found what he needed to say actually came quite naturally, “I came to see you. I’m not going to ask you out because I know what you’d say. And even if you said yes, I’d want you all to myself, you know? Not that anyone can judge what you do with your own body, least of all me... I just... I thought I’d come here... And yeah, I spent two hundred bucks to say that.”

“Why ‘least of all’ you?” Edie asked, “You said, ‘least of all me’ – why?”

“I sold my body to war, to the military.”

It took a moment for Edie to take this in.

“You went to war?” she eventually asked him. He took a seat at the end of the bed, “Yeah, Afghanistan once – Iraq twice.”

Edie’s desire to say, “I knew you’d be back but I didn’t expect it to be so soon”, was replaced by an admiration of sorts. She was left thinking of something else to say.

“That must’ve been really tough”, she said, feeling stupid. She liked Lincoln but was terrified of showing it – falling for clients was banned.

“I don’t know. I know that if someone gave me an extra hour off sometimes, I’d have been grateful. Not that I’m comparing our situations...”, he said a little awkwardly.

“Well, thank-you”, Edie said, kissing him on the cheek, sending shocks through his face – gentle jolts of kindness.

“How long are you going to do this for?” Lincoln asked, looking around the depressing room. Edie sighed then shrugged, “I dunno. I need enough money to leave and never come back.”

L. "You don't like New York?"

E. "I hate this place. I dunno. I don't really think about it."

L. "Days just blur into the next?"

E. "Yeah."

L. "How much money do you need?"

E. "Can we talk about something else?"

L. "Oh, sorry."

E. "No, it's okay. I just – I'm a screw up. I don't like reminding myself, you know?"

L. "Are you in debt?"

Eddie slowly nodded.

E. "I owe a guy some money."

L. "Who?"

E. "This guy. He's my pimp, I guess."

L. "How much?"

E. "Twenty grand."

L. "That sucks."

E. "Yeah."

A silence then entered their conversation. Lincoln searched for his next words, "You know, I met a guy today who told me something that blew my mind more than all the highs and lows of three years alone in New York. It led me to you here tonight."

Eddie's heart, behind the silk and skin, was racing, "What are you talking about?" she asked, half-afraid he was crazy.

"Who is the most powerful person you know?" he asked. His question took her by total surprise.

"What?"

"Who is the most powerful person you know?"

"Lincoln, I don't understand."

“If I just found the right words and put them in the right order, I’d get my ex-wife back, right?”

“Well, maybe, maybe not.”

“But it’s possible – is the point. Well, I’m thinking bigger than that now. It sounds fucking crazy, and it is, so am I, but what have I got to lose? I’ve already got one foot the next life, so why not go for it?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about saying the right things to the right people and tracking down the most powerful person in the world”, Lincoln said with weighted words. Edie processed this for a few seconds before laughing. Lincoln felt the world he was trying to conquer fall out from under him. Shame enveloped him. He was a big joke.

Edie laughed until she saw his serious face unwavering. Then, a kind of horror and pity then stained her remark, “Are you high?”

Lincoln swallowed his pride, thinking how Edie had done so in this very room many times before. Humiliated, he ignored her cynicism before repeating, “Who is the most powerful person you know?”

Edie tried to hide her smirk. She didn’t know how to break this awkwardness other than by reverting to her trade, so placed a seductive hand tenderly on his thigh. She gazed at him with her deep pool eyes, and in luxurious tones to melt all men of their resolve, she said, “You are.”

Lincoln pushed her hand away and got to his feet. The time of falling prey to nymphaean curses had ended.

“You don’t have to take me seriously, but please just take me to whoever you’ve been thinking of”, he said. Edie was confused, not by his resistance to her advance, but by what he was actually talking about.

“I swear, you’re the weirdest customer I’ve ever had”, she said.

“You can mock me all you like but—”

“I don’t know! I don’t know who the most powerful person is! The president?” she interrupted, bemused by his crazy train.

“No! The most powerful person that *you* know. You – personally”, Lincoln said. Edie understood and frowned, thinking to herself how stupid this all was.

“I don’t know. The asshole I owe money to, I guess”, she confessed.

“Can you introduce me to him?” Lincoln wasted no time in asking.

“Ah, no! He’s a psychopath”, Edie said.

“I’ve been to war”, Lincoln retorted.

“Well, good, because this guy has bodyguards – violent criminals.”

“I’ll stroke his ego. After all, I’m a customer.”

“You’re crazy”, she said, shaking her head slowly.

“I know”, he replied.

“Lincoln...” she said desperately, “You’re not a soldier anymore.” Lincoln paused as what Edie said struck him across the face like a slap. It was true – he wasn’t a soldier. He had let his mental and physical edge slide into the gutter with him. A new approach was needed.

“I’ll pay your debt”, he proposed.

“What?”

“Twenty grand, I can get that to you tonight, no problem.”

“What? No...”

“Why not?”

“I just...”

“What?”

“You’ll get hurt”, Edie said, half-admitting for the first time that her affection for him was something other than a professional facade. She hadn’t even realized this herself until now. The true size of her revelation began to dawn on them both. The fact that she

would rather keep Lincoln from harm than have him pay off her debt for her – and expose herself to more harm – was not lost on Lincoln.

“If you can’t help me, Edie, I understand. You’re a good person. An amazing person. But I will find someone who’ll lead me somewhere dangerous”, Lincoln said.

“He’ll just kill you, take your money, and make me keep working”, Edie said.

“*If* that happens, it’s my fault, not yours. I’m not going into this naïvely”, he said. From the look on her face, this still wasn’t enough to convince her of his idea.

“You can just tell me how to set up a meeting, you don’t have to introduce me. He’ll never know you have anything to do with me”, Lincoln said.

“Wait, you’re actually going to spend all your time and money trying to find the most powerful person in the world?” she asked, feeling ridiculous for even repeating it aloud. Lincoln didn’t say anything, he just looked at her and eventually offered a nod.

“You’re going to get yourself killed”, she said.

“Yeah, most likely...” he replied. Edie felt herself almost grieving for Lincoln already. She knew his plan would never work.

“It’s not fair of you to bribe me”, she said.

“*Bribe* you?”

“Yeah! You’re paying me to get your neck in trouble. If something happened to you, I’d be wanted by the cops. Not to mention the guilt I’d feel”, she said.

“Nothing will happen to me.”

“Oh, so that’s gonna help me when you’re dead?”

“I’m not gonna die”, he said. Edie paused for a moment, resigning herself to the fact that her unexpected, unexplainable attraction to Lincoln was pointless – he was too far lost in heartbreak and sadness.

“You know, I wish I met you before your wife did such a number on you. You’d be nice if you weren’t crazy”, Edie said.

“Ex-wife”, Lincoln said.

“What?”

“You called her my wife. It’s ex-wife”, he said, making Edie smile a little. Lincoln caught the smirk.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“I just called you crazy, but all you correct me on is her being your ex?” she asked.

“That’s because I am crazy”, Lincoln said.

“Or is it because you still love her?” Edie asked.

“Look... I’m here to ask if you’re gonna help me or not?”

Edie stared him in the eye as she willed herself to abandon these ‘feelings’ for him. She sighed and admitted, rather reluctantly, “Well, I was actually going to head down to see him after I’d finished up here, pay him some, you know.”

“When do you finish?” he asked quickly.

“After you”, she said.

“Well, why don’t we get out of here right away?” he schemed. Edie hesitated until she thought, “But the money...”

“Alright then”, she finally said, “I’ll meet you outside in about ten minutes. Just wait down the street a bit.” Lincoln smiled to her, and himself – step one of God-only-knows how many had been completed. He had gotten the ball, the world, rolling. He leant in and kissed her on the cheek, her skin so achingly warm and soft. He walked to the door with haste.

“See you soon”, he said before leaving her room and re-entering the incandescent smell of vile romance. He heard Lola’s music before he saw her, the breakbeat making her bob her head. She looked up with a wry smile, “That was quick.”

Ignoring the insult, Lincoln pushed the ‘FUCK’ing door open and shuffled down the stairs to the street. The fresh air of Greenpoint, he felt, cleansed his soul. The musty stink of lust-unwanted washed off him. He took a deep breath.

“How it is to be alive again!” he thought. He took more deep breaths, letting the somewhat chilled evening air freshen his nostrils, letting it circulate under and around his brain, through his skull. The adrenaline!

Perhaps it was all the fresh oxygen, but walking down the sidewalk, Lincoln then realized that this was his last chance to abandon his radical plan. Not that he would, but just that he could. No – he had decided that he would change his life forever.

Some birds flew over the sky, pink and orange as it was. Sunset, the settling in of the night, the end of something.

On the corner of the street, just on some concrete convergence, Lincoln waited for Edie in the same way that men wait for their wives.

Edie soon appeared as nothing else ever had. She had all the class of an older woman and all the sass of a younger one. Lincoln couldn't help but skip a heartbeat though he wished he didn't: he was powerless to her. Powerless to the class of her curve. It was more than enough to seduce him. Everything he had ever dreamed of was walking towards him in a haze of effortless grace. But her homely browns and her softness seemed only to kill his heart more; she was perfect for him had only she let herself thought so too.

Lincoln had never seen her dressed like a woman, only as a decorated sex object. She appeared as a whole new person. She looked strong, independent, intelligent.

“Hey”, she said, as though there was nothing unusual about her beauty. They briefly made eye-contact, exchanged a nervous but warm smile and then encountered an awkwardness they'd not expected – after all, they'd met before, fucked, argued, told secrets. Yet somehow it was as though they were meeting for the first time.

Their raw feelings for each other were in plainer view now that all the circumstances were even. A few minutes ago, Edie didn't even know these feelings were there and she couldn't justify to herself why they were. They just... were. He wasn't handsome, he

wasn't ugly, he was just... real – maybe that was it? Or was she just worried about him, like she would be anyone this crazy?

Nonetheless, removed from the setting of desperate and depressed, exploiter and exploited, they saw each other as they truly were: man and woman – people. These two people stood on this backstreet of Greenpoint, unsure of their body language.

“You look nice”, Lincoln said. Edie smiled a little, “Thanks.”

They strolled in the peaceful still of the fading evening. Leading him around the streets laced with art, through blocks of this cool-invaded neighborhood, Edie couldn't help but think about how utterly absurd Lincoln's idea was. Coming nearer to something that resembled a main road, with some street life expected New York variety, she had to ask, “So, you're serious about all this?”

He smiled, “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why not just travel the world or write a book or something?”

“I feel like I've been dancing on a string my whole life. I want to know where that string leads.”

“So, you think there's some big kind of conspiracy or something?”

“No. I don't know. Conspiracies don't do people who believe in them any good, you know? Illuminati, nine-eleven – fuck all of that. I just know that politics exists between nations but it mainly exists between people. We're social animals, we have hierarchy. Therefore, somewhere out there is the person, the single individual, who has, out of fear, chance, greed, laziness, love – whatever – amassed more power than anyone else. Sorry for ranting.”

Edie smiled, “It's alright, passion takes people places.”

“Yeah, I guess”, Lincoln said before making a point of her statement, “So, where exactly is it taking me now?”

“Queens”, Edie said, opening up the subject of her past.

“So, this guy heads a gang or something?”

“I think he’s some remnant of the Italian mafia.”

“What’s his name?”

“Vettoretti, Giovanni Vettoretti. They call him ‘The Bear’.”

“And he’s a real asshole?”

“Just a product of his environment, I guess.”

They made their way to the Nassau Street underground and roamed in its heat. Rush hour had been and gone but in a city of this scale, it always lingered some – a few people were dotted along the platform waiting for their trains to carry them away. There were no buskers, just people waiting..

While they stood in silence, Edie noticed a copy of The New York Times on the ground nearby. The pages shifted slightly in the warm currents of air that occupied such a place. Something caught her eye; a man and a woman in a picture under a headline.

GOVERNOR WILLIAMS WANTS LOCKE FOR MAYOR

She quickly picked it up and began reading.

“Holy shit, I know this guy”, she said, “He’s one of my customers...”

“What guy?” Lincoln asked, looking to read the article.

“This guy, this... judge... Jonathan Locke.”

As soon as Lincoln connected the headline to the people it spoke of to Edie, the plan formulated instantly in his head and missed only a few minor details. The words of Francis Bacon rang in his thoughts, “Knowledge is power.”

He had something over this mayoral candidate and he was now more powerful than he was. The exhilaration of dramatically cutting into the power queue prevented Lincoln

from saying anything, or even realizing that he still needed to talk Edie into helping him further. She hadn't concocted the cunning Lincoln had.

Lincoln's eyes darted across the page as wildly as his ideas did across his brain. He studied the fattened face of this judge, with sagging eye sockets and swine features unhidden by a grotesque smile. His hair was slicked back, it looked like slime.

"You don't happen to know if he's married, do you?" Lincoln asked, making her laugh.

"No, not everyone tells me about their personal lives. Some don't even talk to me, they just take out their dicks, like this asshole", she said.

"Yes!" Lincoln thought to himself, "She hates him, that's how you sway her."

"What sanctimonious scum", she said, finishing reading about his "Pledge to the people of New York" and handing it to Lincoln so he could read it.

"He's filthier than that page that he's printed on", she said as Lincoln read it and tossed it onto the blackened tracks before them.

"Yeah, he sounds like it", Lincoln felt his moment and pounced, "You wanna get back at him?" Edie paused, a frown darkening her face. She knew exactly, more or less, what Lincoln was thinking.

"Why are you trying to fuck up my life more than it already is?"

"I swear to God – I'm not – I don't believe in God, but... I'm not trying to hurt you", he stammered. "Fuck, you've got to get better at convincing people of things", he thought upon seeing himself losing her persuasion.

"We go to this mafia bitch, I pay all your debt, or I give you the money, you pay him off once and for all, then we go screw over this piece of shit judge, see who he can introduce us to", Lincoln schemed.

"Us?" Edie asked, thunderstruck at what was happening to her life, if she let it. Lincoln saw the light of the train begin to glide up the side of the tunnel. He knew he'd have to shout eventually over the screech of its arrival, so he just started shouting

anyway, but passion was also partly the reason. Passion laced with frustration, not just at Edie's fear or reluctance, but at that of humanity, which she had momentarily embodied with her "Us?" remark.

"You mean to tell me that you don't want to find the people that have made us sell our minds, bodies, and souls to their own selfish, greedy, lazy asses? You don't want to look them in the eye and say 'I fucking found you, you scum, you cunt, I fucking found you, there is nowhere you can hide that I won't find you, there is a price to pay, I do have value, I do count for something, I fucking found you, you fucker, I'm fucking looking you in the eye to tell you that you're human, and I fucking am too!' You, Edie, don't want to find these people and remind them that their actions hurt us and that it isn't only in their time of death that this might haunt them, but also in their time of life? You don't want that? It's revenge and forgiveness all in one!"

By the time he had finished, tears were welling in his eyes, his hands and knees were trembling, and the train had stopped. People began to flood the platform and swamp Edie and Lincoln, who remained still, just standing there as though they were alone, staring at each other.

"I had to sell myself to you", Edie eventually said.

"I know. I'm really sorry. I'm really ashamed about that. Let me make it up to you."

"I feel like you're still buying me."

Lincoln stepped onto the train, "If you don't get on this train, I promise I'll never bother you again."

Edie only had seconds to think and act. The threshold had been laid down, it was immense, much more so than the yellow line at her feet which marked it.

Chapter Four
COURTSHIP

Some force-unnamed pushed Edie onto the train.

“Whoa, did I just choose this?” she asked herself, finding fate, free will and the prospect of no more prostitution all mixed into one giant confusing mess.

“Who is this guy? Is he going to hurt me?” she wondered as the train jerked into motion towards the destination announced overhead. She looked at Lincoln with eyes that gave away her thoughts.

Lincoln felt horrible knowing he had blackmailed Edie into blackmailing someone else all for his own selfish sense of purpose. The fact that he was untying her from her debt, from that bed, from that place, did little to atone his guilt.

“I’ll make this up to you”, he said as they stood, holding the steel bars around them. Edie didn’t know what to say other than, “I have to sit down.”

On the sideways seats that carried millions of lives every day, she sat and took a deep breath, resting her head in her hands. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine being somewhere far away, like some sandy beach in the South Pacific. The sway and rock of the train trundling along carried Lincoln to the seat next to her.

“We can—”

“Just stop talking!” she said quickly, shutting down his weapon-like words, “I like you but right now you feel like a monster. Please, just, let’s do this first part and we’ll talk after that.”

As Edie tried to return her mind to warm sands and water, Lincoln's heart broke. He sought to challenge monsters, not become one. He knew he had to be quiet, and that Edie must speak next.

Both feeling miserable, they sat in silence, letting the rhythm of the tracks and noise and flow and cool air soothe their sins. They longed for clear consciences.

When the train arrived at Court Square, Edie got to her feet without a word. Lincoln followed her shadow. Once they had climbed to the surface, but were still within the station, Edie finally spoke, "I need nineteen and a half thousand." She kept her head down, unable to look at Lincoln.

"I'll have to go to a few ATMs to get that much. You want to wait here?" he suggested. Head low, Edie nodded. She waited for him to leave before allowing herself to let out a sob. She made sure nobody was close enough to hear her weep, looking up with teary eyes at Lincoln as he walked away. She wasn't exactly sure why she was upset, only that she was both drawn to and terrified by Lincoln in equal quantities.

She found a bench to sit on, her mind racing so fast it may as well have been totally blank, for nothing was being processed properly.

"What's happening? Breathe. Why are you upset? He's setting you free, but he just feels like... like some kind of enchanting vampire. Is he setting you free or stealing you for himself? Holy shit. What the hell is happening?" she managed to realize she was thinking.

Through immense power of will, she found herself on the white sands of an island. Letting the warm grains slip through her toes and fingers and embed in her skin, she promised herself not to worry about anything else until her debt was done.

It was these sounds of waves and flickers of sunlight through her eyelashes, that hot sun on her face, that Edie retreated to whenever she had to sleep with a client. What scared her, however, was that she had never had to visit this beach when Lincoln had

visited her. He had always been sad and gentle, but now she felt that he was he fucking her just like the rest.

“Seriously, Edie, would sex with a hundred more people really be better than this? Just calm down, and for the love of everything that is holy, stop thinking. Lie in the sun”, she thought, reimagining the beach back into her head. The beach was a place that could not be stolen. Often it was the only place she felt she had left.

After time and sand had calmed her, Edie opened her eyes again, returning herself to the stark fluorescence of Court Square. Figures, bodies of people she didn’t know – would never know – went about their night, drifting as people do through their lives, through the range of happy and sad.

Despite her best efforts, she again found herself thinking about Lincoln. It was the same compulsion that pushed her on the train that returned him to her thoughts; he was ultimately fascinating to her, an evil allure of sorts. Part of her hated him for making her feel guilty about not seeking to confront the ills of the world, part of her loved him for doing so.

“You’re a good person, regardless of how much you seek revolution or not, or whatever the hell it is he’s seeking. Right? You’re a good person, aren’t you? Complacent ignorance isn’t bad, it just is what it is. You’re a good person! Run away from this place! Run away from this man! Run away!” Her head spun.

The way she felt in this moment reminded her of the emotions she’d had as a child. Her mother was strict, very strict, and didn’t approve of Edie watching cartoons. But she’d never turn the television off or stop Edie from watching them, she’d simply sit nearby and look at Edie and say, “These shows will poison your mind, they will *poison* it, *poison*.” She would say this while little Edie would cry and just try to focus on her favorite shows. It was a traumatizing, heartbreaking feeling of sadness; being made to feel awful for doing something innocent that you enjoy. In this case, it was the dream of paying off

debt and escaping her nightmare. Lincoln had made that dream, her one hope in this life – the promise of a faraway beach – feel like a selfish sin against her fellow human.

“How dare he?” she thought, resenting his self-appointed righteousness, “You don’t pay off someone’s debt just to make them owe the whole world even more!”

Nerves on tenterhooks, she took some deep breaths. A new plan then formulated in her head: take Lincoln’s money, pay the debt, and don’t return to Court Square. Don’t return to help this lunatic on his pointless quest. She’d make for California first, then she’d drift over the ocean, that endless blue that remembers nothing.

As the time passed while she waited, the idea grew in certainty in her mind. So much so, that she’d even decided San Francisco over Los Angeles as a destination.

Then, unexpectedly as these things seem to always occur, with her eyes looking low, a piece of graffiti otherwise-unnoticed caught Edie’s eye. Etched into the seat in which she sat, in urban scrawl, it read:

we are not here to judge others

we are here to court ourselves

The poetry worked, in that for a brief moment her thoughts forgot Lincoln. However, it didn’t last long. She soon saw him walking back towards her, sending a chill down the back of her neck to about halfway down her spine.

His hands were in his jacket pockets and Edie rightly assumed they were full of cash. She got to her feet as calmly as she could and opened her handbag. The twenty thousand dollars of paper gold took up little more space than a textbook might. They briefly made eye-contact during the quick exchange, Lincoln’s emerald irises not scaring her as much as she thought they would.

“Where did you get so much money from?” she couldn’t help but asking.

“Divorce settlements”, Lincoln replied as Edie quickly did up her handbag zip, securing her tickets to freedom.

“Well, thanks”, she said keeping her fringe low to hide her face from his. She expected this to be the last thing she’d ever say to him.

“So, I’ll just wait here. If you come back, you come back. If not, that’s your choice”, Lincoln then said, having obviously done some forward thinking of his own. Edie almost swallowed her tongue at his words. He had done it again; lathered her up in loving guilt. She just wanted to get away from him.

“Okay”, she said, head down. It pained Lincoln tremendously to see how much he appeared to be hurting her, though as he couldn’t find words to administer any relief, he just remained silent. Edie decided not to say anything else either, so with a sigh and a final look at Lincoln, she began to walk away.

He watched her merge with the mob of commuters before taking the seat that had just been hers. When she dropped out of sight, he was completely divided over whether or not he would ever see her again. It wasn’t the money he cared about, it was her. He hoped like hell he’d see her face again, her face with less sorrow clinging to it.

“If anything comes out of what you’re up to, let it be that”, he thought.

As New Yorkers went by, he tried to formulate a plan to blackmail the judge. On his quick dash around all the nearby ATMs, he’d drawn cash but nothing of a feasible ploy. The problem was that if Edie no longer worked for Giovanni Vettoretti, how could she sell herself to Locke? It struck him that Lola, the ‘front of house’ at the brothel, would have to think Edie still worked for Vettoretti. But then, even so, how did he get into the brothel to lunge at his prey? He had to catch Locke in the room during his hour with Edie. All he would need then was his cellphone to film Locke – and a gun just in case. That would start ‘negotiations’ off. The road to Governor Williams would emerge from the fog of fate. However, there was little point considering all this until he saw Edie return.

And, if he was honest with himself, he wouldn't blame her or be surprised if she didn't. He had been everything he hated: sanctimonious, preachy, hypocritical, manipulative, and worst of all, he had used dollars to get his way. He had started his journey to the top by acting like those he was trying to hunt down.

"Maybe such a thing is required? To find them you must become like them. You must purge your soul as they have", he thought, resenting such a notion however true it may prove to be. He just hoped his actions didn't make themselves redundant...

Like Edie had done, he put his head in his hands and sighed, leading him to also catch the graffiti.

court ourselves

Its philosophical nature made him start thinking how long this journey to the top, which was still only a matter of hours old, might actually take.

"Months or years? Or decades? I don't want to live that long", he thought. He checked his watch: 9:15pm. He decided to give Edie til 10pm, maybe 10:30pm before accepting she'd done the smart thing and fled. How he would occupy himself while he waited, he didn't know. Despite spending the vast majority of his time alone, he wasn't great with his own company.

For a few minutes, footsteps swept along the seconds. No other city on Earth was as good for the sport of people watching, but the endless waves of human beings, all with their own lives, stories, dreams and hungers, soon became too overwhelming.

Seeking refuge from the chaos, often Lincoln retreated to a forest in his mind, nowhere in particular, just under the leafy shade of wood and birdsong. He needed this escape from New York every now and then, loving this maddening city though he did. The green and browns of such places offered the scent of childhood, hence why he was occasionally drawn to fragments of it like Central Park.

9:30pm.

“She’ll come back”, he hoped, “She’ll come back.”

9:45pm.

“What I wouldn’t do for some goddamn cigarettes”, he thought. There was a shop nearby but he was afraid to abandon his post just in case.

9:55pm.

“C’mon.”

10pm.

“It’s fine. I’m sure it takes a lot of talking to resolve these kinds of things. Like, ‘Where did you get all this money?’”

10:15pm.

“Over an hour... that’s a little troubling.”

At 10:30pm, Edie still hadn’t returned to the slowly dying bustle of Court Square. But Lincoln had seen families go for take outs and return, a bum had asked him three times for, “A dollar, sir?” and he’d heard some busker play his repertoire twice over.

“She’s not coming back”, he finally admitted to himself.

Then, as though the Universe was simply waiting for him to surrender up his hope, Edie re-emerged from the streets of Queens. Their lives again crossed paths.

Lincoln and Edie. Edie and Lincoln.

He got to his feet as she approached him; her pace was agitated, her aura visibly distressed. Before he could ask, “How did it go?” she plunged her face into his shoulder and sobbed two words, “Thank-you.”

With passers-by turning their heads to briefly watch this scene, Lincoln put his arms around her. She felt lighter than the last time he did this. Wetting his jacket with her tears, she began to compose herself and looked up at his green eyes.

“Thank-you”, she wept. Lincoln felt his jaw grow heavy with emotion, but he still managed a smile, his spirits somewhat lifted, “You’re welcome.”

She soon pulled back to wipe her eyes, unfazed by strangers watching her as though she were some actress.

“How did it go?” Lincoln asked, holding her arms, holding her safe.

“I don’t wanna talk about it, it’s over, that’s all I care about”, Edie said. Her response unsettled Lincoln slightly.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t wanna talk about it”, she said, regaining some composure.

“Did they hurt you?”

“No.”

Quickly examining her visible skin, Lincoln saw no signs of abuse, but something had obviously happened to her. Although he didn’t know that she had been planning to run off, he was still shocked that she had run back into his arms. Before she couldn’t even look at him. What had happened? If she didn’t want talk about it, all he could do was wait until she did...

“Where do you live?” she eventually asked.

“East Village”, he said, letting her go after realizing he was still holding onto her.

“Apart from these clothes, everything else apart my past can be lost”, she said.

“My place is small, but you can take the couch”, he said. A sad smile graced her beautiful face, “Thanks.”

They caught the E-line before then crossing onto the 6-line. This train journey was very different to their last; they sat together, close, their knees bumped. No words from either felt like spoiling the apparent comfort they were now finding in each other. Lincoln resisted the temptation to inquire about her meeting with her pimp, though it took some effort on his part.

Almost like a real couple, they walked through the residential streets of the East Village. Passing pizza places and bars, these once downtrodden streets of Manhattan guided this lost, unlikely pair to Lincoln’s apartment. It was on the ground floor, just off

1st Avenue, and much like Edie's old room in that sex-pit, it was sparse – it offered no clues as to who Lincoln really was, except for that being a clue in and of itself.

It was open-plan, the floor was hardwood – polished, the walls white, the furniture modern, the kitchen new, everything was clean, there was a feature wall made of brick, all the decor matched. The only evidence that Lincoln actually lived here, other than his key working in the lock, was the half-drunken bottle of rum on the dining table. Flicking the dimmest of the lights on, Lincoln lit up what seemed like paradise to Edie.

“Here, my room is this way”, he said, opening a door off of the main living area, “The bathroom is that way, make yourself at home.” He tossed the keys onto the couch and smiled weakly to her.

“This place is beautiful”, she said, still taking it all in.

“It's good that someone appreciates it. I just sleep here. You can cook or whatever. Use the key in the door, I guess, just don't lose it. Don't worry about me, I'm just gonna sleep on the couch. Make as much noise as you want”, Lincoln said, sitting back on the grey, velvety lounge suit.

Edie didn't move, she simply stood and admired this home which largely went unused. Resting his head on a cushion of deep red, Lincoln reached under the couch for a blanket, which he pulled over himself and closed his eyes. He knew Edie hadn't moved by the lack of footsteps on the wooden floors, and said, “Get some sleep, we'll figure tomorrow out tomorrow.”

He then heard her slip her shoes off and wander around the apartment, taking it all in. The whole time Lincoln kept his eyes shut. To his genuine surprise, he soon felt Edie lift the blanket and climb under it with him.

“I want to sleep here too”, she said timidly. Lincoln didn't open his eyes, just his heart, which bet quickly. His mind, however, raced faster, “What happened to this woman? I went from a monster to a... friend?”

With the warmth of their bodies pressed up against each other, like people cold warmed by a fire, they rested their exhausted souls together, their aching bones. They fell asleep, innocently, the only semi-sexual action being a subtle appreciation from Lincoln of Edie's scent, her hair was of soft brown aroma, like the woods, the smell of sweet pine or the like. To her, Lincoln's breathing was as the waves on the beach. Finding their secret places of refuge in each other, unto the kingdom of perpetual night they went.

Their dreams were mingled with the lovely sensation of holding someone close. Drifting in and out of sleep for brief moments, they both felt secure for the first night in respective memory. A laziness and ease of comfort stayed with them all the while, until the dawn broke gently, and even then they continued in slumber, like siblings or young children. True rest was the place they both reached. Softness and an abundance of sanctuary kept them there for some hours. Their body warmth soon gave way to the June heat which crept into Lincoln's apartment.

They woke slowly, giving each other kind smiles, smiles that suggested they'd both returned from some place wonderful only to be reminded that their current situation was nice too.

"Hey", Edie said, still half in dreamtime.

"Hey."

Resting their heads, they looked into each other's eyes. Something had truly changed in Edie, though Lincoln didn't know what. She now looked at him with a kind of sorrow instead of the dread that had crept into her eyes in the subway. Deciding again not to ask, Lincoln's mind was on the judge.

"So..." he said, breaking the magic moment they had shared. That single word, those two letters – they shattered the illusion for Edie that her life had changed forever.

"So..." she sighed.

"How do we do this?" Lincoln asked.

“Thanks for taking care of me”, Edie decided to say, despite what Lincoln had said. It went some way to showing him how she was feeling.

“You’re welcome, thanks for keeping me company”, he said.

“I doubt Katie – sorry, ‘Lola’ – that girl in the front room, I doubt she’s been told I’m out. I’ve got her phone number. I can tell her that I’m taking a break from work and just to call me if that guy, that judge, if he comes in looking for me because he tips well”, Edie blurted out, wanting the logistics to be over and done with. It sounded air-tight to Lincoln, only, “How do I get in?” he asked.

“There’s a back door. I’ll make sure it’s open”, Edie said. It all seemed a little too easy for Lincoln, but he wasn’t going to assume that this meant the plan was flawed.

“We won’t hurt this guy, but we’ll teach him a lesson”, he said, trying to reassure her. Neither of them spoke on the subject again.

“What should we do until he needs to get his end away?” Edie asked dryly. Lincoln shrugged, “Until yesterday I spent most my time walking the streets and riding the subways.”

“Should we just get food?” Edie asked.

And so they did. With hints of that dizzying feeling of new affection, though they wouldn’t let on, they went walking around the city looking for somewhere to eat. In Greenwich, they found a small Italian place.

While they ate, Edie asked a little about Lincoln’s war experiences. He mentioned how incredible the sunsets in Afghanistan were. He then asked about her childhood. She chose to speak only of her beloved pets. At one point, Edie made a dumb joke that made Lincoln laugh:

“What do you call a fish with no eyes? Fsh.”

It was like a real date with nervous examples of their true selves being shown at carefully chosen moments; half-smiles, human things.

Although, the whole time Edie was all too aware she was wearing the clothes she had worn to work the day before.

After their meal, which they both felt was overpriced, they gave the incredulous waitress just a \$1 tip and fled. They joked about her down the street.

Then, before either of them could ask the question of what was to happen next, Edie got her phone call.

Chapter Five
THE JUDGE

Back on the blue-collar streets of Greenpoint.

“Don’t take too long, okay?” Edie said.

“Don’t worry”, Lincoln assured her.

“Go one block over. You’ll see a green door with a wooden board over the window. I’ll unlock it. Please, when you hear me taking him to my room, come straight up. The rest is up to you”, Edie said.

“Yeah”, Lincoln said, bracing himself.

“I’ll see you inside”, Edie added before turning on her heels and heading towards the brothel. Lincoln took a deep breath and watched her as she walked away. Once she had disappeared, he slowly followed her instructions and made his way to the back entrance of the underworld.

It was marked by a green door with a boarded up window. Loitering nearby on the deserted street for a few minutes, Lincoln felt the small of his back and with his fingers he graced the loaded Glock resting in his jeans. There was nothing left to do but the deed.

Opening the green door, he smelt that smell yet again – sickly and sweet as it was. At the bottom of a dark stairwell, he then heard a door open and close. Then a voice that made his skin crawl cut through the pink-air.

“Fuck, you’re a gorgeous”, he heard the judge say.

“Thank-you. It doesn’t feel like work when you’re here”, Edie said. It broke Lincoln’s heart, not because she obviously just said that to everyone, but because she was still needing to say it – because of him.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, revealing the stairs before him. Knowing what each passing second meant for poor Edie, he climbed the stairs as quietly as haste would allow. Coming to the notorious hallway yet again, Lincoln crept along to Edie’s door. He took out his cellphone and switched on the video recorder.

Not wanting to blow everything, he put his ear up to the door and listened to what was happening behind it. He didn’t want to put Edie through undue indignity, but he still needed to catch the judge in an uncompromising position. He heard the repugnant sound of the judge experiencing some kind of pleasure of the flesh.

Lincoln hit record and flung the door open, storming into that room draped in sin and misery.

The judge was sprawled out on his back on Edie’s bed, his hairy belly protruding upwards as she straddled him. His shirt and pants were undone, but other than that, Edie hadn’t had to suffer too much of his skin. He was far more revolting to look at in real life than in an ugly photograph on a dirty newspaper.

Upon Lincoln entering, she climbed off the judge and backed out of the camera’s view, scurrying into the corner of the room – a look of vindication in her eye.

“What the fuck?” the judge exclaimed, completely disorientated. Instantly realizing he’d been caught red-handed, he didn’t know by who or for what reason. He quickly sat up and did the zip up on his pants. Remaining completely silent, he waited for Lincoln to make the first move.

“Sit on the bed, stay looking at the camera. If you keep quiet and calm, everyone is gonna be fine”, Lincoln ordered, keeping the camera rolling and fixed on his prey.

Eddie watched as the judge's life seemed to shatter around him, his face turning a whitish-green, pale-sick as he got a taste of the shame she had endured for so long in this room.

"I'm going to ask you a few short questions and you're going to answer them truthfully. Once you answer me honestly, I'm going to turn this camera off and we're going to have an off-the-record conversation about what I want in return for not sharing this footage with anyone outside this room. Do you understand?" Lincoln said. Eddie's heart beat fast, granted, but not as fast as the two men's did.

"Yes", the judge said.

"Is your name Jonathan Locke?" Lincoln asked.

"Yes."

"Are you a New York City judge?"

"Yes."

"Are you the New York City mayoral candidate who won the recent support of New York State Governor Samantha Williams?"

"Yes."

"And lastly, are you currently using the illegal services of a Brooklyn brothel?"

The judge sighed in helpless surrender, "Yes."

"Thank-you, Jonathan", Lincoln said, stopping the recording and showing the judge.

"So what the fuck do you want?" the judge said straight away.

"Whoa! The camera goes away and suddenly you're a tough guy? I'm a war vet, asshole. I'll kill you with my bare hands", Lincoln said.

"I know this little whore's boss. I keep him out of jail. I go down, he goes down, she fucking goes down. Right to the bottom of the East River. There's a lot of bones down there, you want to make her join them, be my fucking guest", the judge said.

Lincoln's togetherness kept Eddie calm in the face of the violent death threat. She was simply astounded at what she was seeing play out in front of her.

“I want you to introduce me to the Governor”, Lincoln said.

“Who are you?” the judge asked.

“It doesn’t matter who I am”, Lincoln said, unsettling the judge with his smooth demeanor.

“Are you in trouble or something? You need it sorted out?” the judge asked, trying to learn something, anything, about this man blackmailing him.

“I’m not in trouble. You are, unless you introduce me to the Governor. Make that introduction happen – video’s gone. You’ll never see either of us again and you can go back to cleaning up the corruption in the city. Do we have a deal?”

“Governor Samantha Williams?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t do that. It’s simply impossible.”

“Do you have any idea what your life in prison would be like?” Lincoln asked, making the judge’s insides churn with anxiety.

“Why do you want to see her?” the judge asked, trying to gain some leverage, trying to gain anything.

“You don’t need to know”, Lincoln replied.

“It’d be a lot easier for me to convince her to see you if I knew why you wanted to”, the judge said.

“That isn’t my problem.”

“What if you’re planning something? I don’t want to be an accessory to a crime.”

“You won’t be.”

“How do I know that? I can’t trust you!”

“Once again, that isn’t my problem”, Lincoln said before adding, “And you’ll make this introduction happen tonight too.”

“You’re insane”, the judge concluded.

“Quite possibly”, Lincoln said. His agreement to this sentiment terrified the judge who realized he was being held hostage by a complete lunatic.

“How do you propose I do this tonight?” he asked Lincoln.

“I’m getting tired of reminding you which problems are yours alone”, Lincoln said, reiterating that he couldn’t care less about the judge’s predicament. The judge knew he was stuck, he had little choice but to play the game.

“If I introduce you, you’ll delete the video?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And I’m supposed to just trust you, am I?”

“I’ll have no use for it after I meet her.”

The judge paused at Lincoln’s subtle hint to some kind of agenda before asking, “What are you planning on doing to Williams?”

“For the last time, you don’t need to know!”

“I’d sooner go to jail, sooner lose my career and reputation than have a United States Governor killed.”

“I’m not going to kill her!” Lincoln said angrily, “I’m just gonna talk to her.”

In the few heightened seconds that the judge had known Lincoln, he had picked up a few small pieces of his character. Importantly, the way Lincoln had just said aloud his intentions made the judge fairly certain he wasn’t lying. He was lied to repeatedly on a daily basis by all kinds of criminals, from petty thieves to high-end fraudsters. He couldn’t articulate his hunch any better to himself other than, “Lies just sound different.”

“I can try calling her. I’ll tell her that I’ve just met someone who she really must see. I’ll tell her that I can’t tell her anything more over the phone and that we’ll have to pass by her office. How does that sound?” the judge asked.

“Whatever you have to do, do it”, Lincoln said, “But put your phone on speaker so I know you aren’t up to anything.”

The judge sighed in acceptance. Williams was going to hate him for this.

With his pulse racing, Lincoln managed to keep his composure. He couldn't quite believe it, he had done it again – he had broken through another level of the power structure.

The judge then took out his cellphone, but both he and Lincoln soon stopped in surprise when Edie called out, “Wait!”

They turned to see her quietly weeping where she sat.

“What’s wrong?” Lincoln asked.

“Please don’t do this”, Edie said through tears.

“Do what?” Lincoln asked, more than just a little confused.

“This! What you’re doing. Forget about all this shit and stay with me”, Edie said, her eyes wet, glistening in sadness. Lincoln was somewhat speechless. The judge slowly put his cellphone away, a subtle grin on his face.

“Edie, I... I don’t understand, what are you saying?” Lincoln asked.

“How can you not understand? Stay with me!” Edie pleaded. Lincoln was caught off guard. He didn’t know how to deal with this, not while keeping an eye on the judge.

“You want to be with me?” he asked.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, sobbing a little.

“But... why?” he asked.

“Because I... I think I love you”, she admitted, looking to him with the saddest, prettiest face Lincoln had ever seen.

“You love me?” he asked, causing a slight snigger from the judge. Lincoln turned to him with scolding eyes, “Turn around, face the wall and shut up, you sick fuck.”

Rolling his eyes, the judge turned to face the wall. Keeping a close eye on him, Lincoln walked over to Edie and sat down on the floor against the wall next to her. He didn’t know what to say, so he held her hand and hoped the words would come.

“I think I love you too”, he finally said. Edie just sniffled in reply. Then, with a heavy heart – the weight of iron – broken and chewed up as it was, Lincoln sighed and said, “But I have to do this.”

“But why? It’s so stupid and dangerous!” Edie said, bottom lip shaking.

“I have to do this, Edie”, Lincoln said.

“Please, Lincoln, please... please don’t. Please just stay with me.”

“Edie—”

“I’ll be so good to you. Please... please, please, please! Please stay.”

Lincoln tried to think of a way to soften his hardened thoughts. He simply couldn’t. However, Edie took control; she placed her hand softly on his chest and looked slowly up at him. Those eyes. Lakes of beauty and promise and love... then she kissed him gently, letting their lips feel every little touch. She could feel his breath quicken, and chose her delicate moment to whisper, “Stay.”

For a second, her spell worked and Lincoln saw his life with her unfold. It would be happy. It would be all those things people want so desperately from another person. They would smile and walk down the streets of the world together. Their shattered lives would mend piece by piece, day by day, one gentle moment of affection after the next.

But that second passed and he returned to the Greenpoint brothel. As he looked into her eyes, he knew he had to leave her, for he’d seen that look before in a woman – that meek plea, the pledge of warmth that just goes cold.

“I’m sorry”, he said softly, himself now choking with emotion.

“No, no...” Edie said, almost in a panic, her hands beginning to tremble, “No, please Lincoln! Stay. Just stay!”

“Goodbye, Edie”, Lincoln said before kissing her damp cheek. Edie grabbed his arm as he was about to rip himself from her, and they caught eyes again.

“I love you”, she said, heartbroken, “Won’t you love me too?”

“You deserve a better man than me”, Lincoln said. Edie collapsed in a distraught heap. Her eyes ran with salt and sorrow. Painfully heaving himself upward, Lincoln walked over to the judge.

“Keep your back to Edie and get out of the room”, Lincoln said. Opening the door to the hallway, Lincoln checked the way was clear. The judge shuffled into the corridor of black carpet as he was ordered to.

Lincoln looked over to Edie before he left her room for the last time and said, “Thank-you, Edie... for everything.”

She didn’t look at him, she kept her head low and wept. Her soul appeared to have been crushed. Lincoln stepped into the hallway and shut the door, knowing he would likely never see her again.

As hard as it was, he switched his attention to the judge.

“Alright, Your Honour, walk to end of the hallway and take the stairs down to the street”, he said. The judge did as he was told.

Down the stairs and through the back door they went, back onto the beaten up blocks of Greenpoint. The night was warm, the air not cool. Nobody was really around other than a few old residents here and there. Daily summer life was in ease of itself.

The hum of New York City, although unseen from where they were, nonetheless reminded them of their place on the world stage.

“Cross the street, make your call – speakerphone”, Lincoln then demanded. The judge lead Lincoln away from the brothel and took out his cellphone. They loitered on the sidewalk for a moment. Before long, the phone was buzzing loudly and was soon answered by a crisp kind of voice.

“What is it?” the Governor asked, no niceties. Lincoln could tell straight away that she was the perfect person for him to meet next.

“Samantha, how are you?” the judge asked, seeking to soften her up.

“Depends on what you’ve got to tell me”, she said astutely.

“Well, that’s good because I’ve got good news. I’ve just met a young man who I think you’re going to find extremely interesting to talk to.”

“Is that right? Who is he?”

“I really shouldn’t say over the phone, but believe me, you’ll want to meet with him as soon as possible – tonight even.”

“Jonathan, what the hell are you up to?”

“I wish I could tell you now, I really do, but you’ll just have to wait until you talk to him. So, are you free?”

“I’m going to JFK shortly but if you and this kid can make it to my office within the next hour, I’ll give you five minutes.”

“Excellent! I’ll bring him over now.”

“Very well”, and with that she was gone, the conversation falling silent after a click. The judge put his cellphone back in his pocket before looking to Lincoln with weariness ingrained in every single wrinkle of his face.

“That wasn’t so hard”, Lincoln said.

The judge shook his head, “If she doesn’t kill me, she’s gonna kill you.”

“Aha”, Lincoln said with dull sarcasm, unimpressed by the judge’s attempt to sound dramatic, “Take me to your car.”

The way the judge said, “Sure thing”, before leading Lincoln slowly down the Greenpoint backstreets should have alerted Lincoln to the fact that something was up, that things weren’t going as smoothly as he thought they were. The very smoothness of events should have also spiked his senses with suspicion.

But his senses were overawed by the speed at which things were happening, events caused by his own hands and his own ideas and his own tongue. His guard was down.

And so, as the judge walked down the lunch-pail blocks of this Brooklyn neighborhood, he remained, in more ways than one, a few steps ahead of Lincoln. And, as Lincoln walked carefully behind the judge, just as the thought of “Surely this has been

all too easy” finally entered his head, out of a black vehicle he and the judge had already passed, someone had quietly gotten out, calmly pointed a handgun directly at Lincoln, and, with that unmistakable ‘click’, switched off the gun’s safety.

“Stop where you are, put your hands on your head, and don’t even think about turning around”, said a man with a voice so calm and deep that its mellow, gravelly nature almost hid the threat within its bass.

Lincoln stopped instantly, his thoughts carrying the momentum his feet had just forgone. He had felt the vibration of the low frequency of this man’s command in his teeth. The rattling filled him with stunned horror in the face of his own stupidity. His anger at himself was ratified when he saw the judge ignore the instruction not to turn around, dashing his only remaining hope that this was just a random mugging.

“Alright, fuck face”, the judge said, with a look more disgusting than himself, “Give me the phone.”

Lincoln paused for a moment, just long enough to let a feeling of trepidation seep into the situation.

“Do what he says”, the voice behind him said, the voice belonging to a man who had clearly smoked too many cigarettes in his life, but not yet enough to have given himself some kind of cancer.

Accepting that his own carelessness had got him into this situation, Lincoln tried to move beyond his feeling of hot shame and think of ways to get himself and his grand plan out of this clumsy mess.

Though all he had to go on was the sound of the man’s voice, Lincoln thought he might be able to reason with him and talk his way out of this. Heightened reality is what his country had taught him to expect from life, by raising him on junk-cinema and junk-history to believe he was an exceptional person from an exceptional nation and by encouraging him to plunge headfirst into the insurgent flags of its impassioned enemies. Years on the streets of contrasting places like New York and Baghdad had taught

Lincoln how to follow his impulses in these situations and had given him faith that any moment of heightened reality could be diffused.

Conscious of the Glock at the small of his back and remembering, just for a fraction of a second, the Triangle of Death in Iraq, those places of hissing ferocity where he fought those unafraid of their own deaths, Lincoln tapped into their fearlessness, forcing a steadiness to return to his demeanor on this deserted Greenpoint street.

“What’s your name?” Lincoln asked calmly, craning his neck slightly towards the ground so the man with the leathery voice would know he was speaking to him.

“His name doesn’t fucking matter!” the judge interjected furiously, “Give me the phone.”

“What’s your name?” Lincoln asked again. His calm defiance in the face of the threat of point-blank execution was making the judge uneasy, despite having the supposed upper hand.

“Are you deaf?” the judge asked, allowing himself to become incensed in the hope that anger would quash this rising uneasiness.

“Are *you* deaf?” Lincoln asked of the man behind him, turning his head more deliberately this time to catch a slight glance at the man with the deep voice.

“What did I say about turning around?” the man growled when he caught Lincoln’s brief look.

“Sorry”, Lincoln said, turning his head back to face the judge, having seen all he needed to see in that one quick moment. The man behind him was thickset and of stocky build, but he not overweight like the judge, rather there was a strength in his frame. He was black, wearing cheap clothes and a wedding ring, and he had messy short hair. It was the particulars of his face that yielded the most telling pieces of information, however. The lines under his eyes made him look tired and much older than he probably was. This, and the harshness of the texture of his skin, could only be the result of a hard

life as a child or of hard living as an adult. His eyes were deep brown pools and they offered the slightest suggestion of worry that was nowhere to be found in his voice. Lincoln knew instantly that behind those eyes was not some kind of dim fool who would be the possessor of blind loyalty. He just needed to bring him round to his way of thinking..

“Do as he says”, said the man with the low voice, a voice that sounded like a boulder rolling on broken concrete.

“I’d need to take my hands off my head” Lincoln warned, stalling for time, waiting for an idea to come to him, “Is that okay?”

“Just the one hand”, the man said cautiously.

“Alright”, Lincoln said, taking his left hand off his head and reaching down to take his phone out of his pocket. Lincoln performed all these actions with painstaking slowness, desperately trying to think of a way out of this without having to reach for his Glock. He held his phone out for the judge to take. The judge looked at it with an almost horny desire, desperate to wipe his ignominy from it.

“Place it on the ground, keep your right hand on your head, then back away, real easy like”, the deep voice ordered.

Crouching slowly, Lincoln placed his cellphone on the sidewalk and then stood again. Before stepping away from his phone, however, Lincoln suddenly thought of something, and turned blatantly to face the man.

“Tell me, do you have any idea why he wants the phone so badly?” he asked.

“No, and I don’t care, now turn yo ass around and put your hands up against that wall”, the man said, using the end of his gun to hint at the brick wall connected to a row of houses. The judge let out a snigger, the sweat patches under his arms growing bigger.

“I’m an undercover police officer”, Lincoln suddenly lied, placing his hands on the red brick wall, “And on that phone is the evidence I need to put that son of bitch behind bars.”

“You lying little fuck!” the judge spat. Lincoln wished he could see what the reaction on the man’s face was to this information, but as he couldn’t see him, he was going to have to rely on his twisted words to survive this.

“I noticed you’re wearing a wedding ring. I can’t imagine you’d want to be parted from your wife”, Lincoln threatened, “But that’s what might happen if you let this asshole get away.”

“Shut the fuck up!” the judge snarled. Lincoln turned around just in time to see the judge go to pick up the phone, only for the man to make the judge freeze by pointing the gun at him.

“Don’t touch it, back the fuck up”, the man said to him, before pointing his gun back at Lincoln, desperately trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

“Hands on the wall”, he said to Lincoln.

“Mike, you idiot, he’s lying!” the judge protested.

“So, you do have a name, huh?” Lincoln asked.

“Yeah, Mike”, Mike said, not really sure what to do.

“Well, Mike, I suggest you have a look for yourself and see what’s so goddamn special about that phone. If I’m lying, you and your boss here can leave, I won’t stop you”, Lincoln said.

“He ain’t my fucking boss, man! But he does pay me some good money to drive his car around for him. You better not be costing me some sweet coin here, man”, Mike said, nervousness now appearing in his rocky voice. He kept his eyes on both Lincoln and the judge as he walked forward to pick up the phone.

“Check the videos, there’s only one”, Lincoln said.

Mike swiped his thumb back and forth on the phone’s screen, eventually playing the video. Lincoln heard the recording of what had happened just minutes before a few blocks away in Edie’s room.

“What the fuck?”

“Sit on the bed, stay looking at the camera. If you keep quiet and calm, everyone is gonna be fine. I’m going to ask you a few short questions and you’re going to answer them truthfully. Once you answer me honestly, I’m going to turn this camera off and we’re going to have an off-the-record conversation about what I want in return for not sharing this footage with anyone outside this room. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Is your name Jonathan Locke?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a New York City judge?”

“Yes.”

“Are you the New York City mayoral candidate who won the recent support of New York State Governor Samantha Williams?”

“Yes.”

“And lastly, are you currently using the illegal services of a Brooklyn brothel?”

“Yes.”

“Thank-you, Jonathan.”

A moment of silence then joined the three men on the sidewalk. Lincoln decided to help Mike make up his mind, “It’s up to you, Mike. Who’re you going to trust? Me or him?”

“Mike, he’s in love with the damn hooker, alright, he’s just trying to screw me over”, the judge said, arguing his case rather unconvincingly.

Mike stood there, unsure what to say with booming voice, now silenced.

“Mike, whatever he’s paying you, it ain’t worth fucking your life up for. Give me the phone, walk away, go home to your wife, forget about all of this”, Lincoln said before firing his cheapest shot in the form of a question, “Have you got kids?”

“Yeah.”

“Go home to them, man.”

“Mike”, the judge piped up, “You’ve got to believe me, this guy, he – he set me up! He was waiting in the whore house for me. If he’s really a cop, you really think he’s just gonna come after me and not the girl too? Huh? Of course not. I mean, we’re both breaking the law, right? But he didn’t, he just came after me, because he isn’t a cop – he’s a hooker’s lover. He loves her, that’s why he’s doing this!”

“Y’all both need to shut the hell up!” Mike said. He looked over to Lincoln, who still had his hands on the wall, and then over to the judge, sweating in the hot tension of the evening.

“What did you want in return?” Mike then asked Lincoln.

“What are you talking about?” Lincoln asked.

“You said in the video that you wouldn’t show it to anyone if you get what you want. You said you were going to have an off-the-record conversation. What did you ask him for?” Mike asked.

“I can’t tell you that, Mike”, Lincoln said, frustrated with himself for being unable to think of a lie fast enough.

“Why not?” Mike asked suspiciously.

“Because he isn’t a damn cop!” the judge interjected, seizing his opportunity to tear Lincoln’s charade apart.

“C’mon!” Lincoln thought to himself, “Think of something, you idiot!”

“If you don’t tell me in the next twenty seconds what went down after the camera turned off, I ain’t giving anyone this phone. I’m gonna take it to the police station myself”, Mike said.

“No!” the judge began, “You don’t understand what would happen to me in prison. I put half of them in there! If you give anyone that phone except for me – you’ll kill me. You don’t want that on your conscience, Mike.”

“I asked him if he was willing to talk”, Lincoln cut in, “I asked him whether or not he would be prepared to give us names on a bigger case. The kind of stuff that I couldn’t have ruining that piece of evidence.”

“Bullshit!” the judge said, “You’ve seen the movies, you know they don’t ask those kinds of questions until they have the guy in the station. Cops don’t make bargains in brothels!”

“I don’t know what the hell cops get up to, man!” Mike replied.

“Alright, well, what about handcuffs? Huh? If I was under arrest, wouldn’t I have some chains around my wrists?” the judge said, desperately defending himself. This seemed to make some sense to Mike amongst all the confusion.

“He’s got a point, man”, he said to Lincoln.

“No, he doesn’t! Undercovers don’t carry handcuffs, man. That would sort of defeat the whole purpose of being, you know, ‘undercover’”, Lincoln said.

“Shit, that’s a good point too”, Mike said, not knowing what to do. He was the one in charge of this situation, but he felt completely powerless. He kept looking from the judge, to Lincoln, and back to the judge again.

“Have you got any ID on you?” he then asked Lincoln, “Anything that backs up your story?”

“C’mon, man. What did I just say? I can’t carry anything that proves I’m a cop. The only thing that backs up my story is my word and what you’re holding.”

“Are you really a judge?” Mike then asked the judge.

“Yeah.”

“And are you really running for Mayor of New York?”

“Yeah.”

“And you were really fooling around with a hooker?”

“Jesus, you saw the goddamned video, didn’t you?”

Mike took a deep breath and ran everything over in his head. He finally came to a decision.

“Alright, this is what I’m gonna do”, he started, “I’m gonna give this guy his phone back and I’m gonna walk away. Not because I think he’s a cop, but because I think you deserve some karma, man.”

“You’re gonna get me killed! Don’t be an executioner! Think of those kids of yours, huh, you want them growing up knowing their father had someone killed just for a bit of dumb fun with a dumb girl? You don’t want that on that on your soul. It will keep you up at night for the rest of your life”, the judge pleaded.

Mike ignored the judge and continued to think out loud, “When I disappear down the street, that’s when you two mother fuckers can move. Whatever happens after I’m gone, it ain’t my business and I ain’t gonna make it mine. How does that sound?”

“You’re doing the right thing, Mike, you’re doing the right thing”, Lincoln said.

Mike walked over to Lincoln and gave him his phone back, keeping a close eye on the judge, whose eyes slowly changed shape from feeble windows to his pitiful soul to a narrowed pair of venomous slits.

“Thank-you”, Lincoln said to Mike, taking his hands off the wall and putting his phone in his pocket.

“You need a piece, man?” he asked Lincoln, offering him his gun.

“No, I’ve got one”, Lincoln said, taking his Glock out from the back of his jeans. Mike’s face became one of stunned bewilderment.

“What the fuck, man? Why didn’t you use it?” he asked.

“I’m a good judge of character”, Lincoln said, “I knew you’d make the right decision. Go home to your family.”

Mike didn’t need to be told for a third time to get the hell away from these two men. He took parting, fearful looks at the two men before backing up and walking away. He

looked over his shoulders a couple of times before finally disappearing around a street corner.

Lincoln and the judge watched as Mike left, taking with him some, but not all, of the tension that had made this visit to the brothel feel as though it was pressing on the judge's whites of his eyeballs.

"Do you know what kind of friends I have?" the judge asked menacingly, "I mean, I know you think you know, but have you really stopped to consider just how sadistic some of them are?"

Lincoln put his trusty Glock back in his jeans.

"Sadistic, huh? Get in the damn car."

The judge walked over to his car and got into the driver's seat. Lincoln sat in the back seat.

"Drive", he said. Begrudgingly, the judge turned the key, starting the ignition as if Lincoln's command had brought the engine to life all on its own.

The black car then slowly started on its way to Manhattan.

Chapter Six
THE GOVERNOR

The art was in decanting. That was something Samantha Williams' grandfather had taught her – himself, the grandson of a slave owner.

“Decant!” he would announce when he was drunk, stupefied, pouring himself another drink, “Decant!” She was reminded of such things whenever she poured herself a drink. So, while pouring a whiskey from some crystal demijohn, into a finely crafted glass, she remembered her grandfather. The burn-taste of the whiskey down her throat brought back memories of her antiquated heritage.

The Governor was in her office of ornate oaks and rich carpet. The skirting boards were of dark wood and the artwork were vibrant. But it was dark, almost candlelit. Behind her, large windows revealed the maze of height and light that was Midtown Manhattan. Despite the elegance of such an office, with a bookshelf of green-spined laws and Supreme Court rulings, she felt she deserved a better.

Ambition is always hungry.

She sipped her drink and signed some multi-million dollar statewide manufacturing scheme into existence. Many lives altered with her illegible signature.

Her silver, Persian-ink pen – which had cost a mere \$699.99 – rolled off her desk and hit the ground with a thud. She was too tired to pick it up just yet. Instead, she sat back in her leather chair and stared at the ceiling of her Manhattan office. It had a frame of French plaster and she momentarily wondered, “Who spent the extra thousands to have that above my head?”

Pivoting on her chair, she looked out at New York from the 40th floor. Night was starting to settle in and in this June heat and humidity, from a dark cloud looming over New Jersey, it started to rain. It was torrential, as if the Hudson had leapt off its riverbed. Drenching the people on the street, she watched as they scurried for cover.

Below, the downpour caused mayhem, but in the Governor's office it gently rattled against the windows and soothed her head, letting her mind wander. She thought back to that odd call received a few minutes ago from the judge.

"Who on earth could this person be?" she pondered with a relatively absent mind, "Is he some kind of whistle blower? Finding a Snowden could solidify me for the ages..."

The Governor's biggest fear was being forgotten.

Glancing over to the incoming storm out west, the Governor then thought about her night ahead in D.C. She was speaking alongside several other dignitaries at a Democratic Party fundraiser but hoped to also squeeze in a meeting with the Secretary of State. He'd probably want to talk about Iran, but she was much more interested in any news he might have about the upcoming primaries for the 2016 election.

Then, at that precise moment, there was a knock at her door.

"What is it?" she called out, staring out the window. The door opened slightly and a well presented figure entered the room. Carter had been the Governor's personal assistant for nearly four years now and although he secretly hated the job, his professionalism was so refined that he never put a single word out of place.

"Excuse me, ma'am", he said, "But Mr Locke is here to see you. He says he has an appointment, but I can't find any mention of one."

"Send him in", the Governor said, not taking her eyes off the rain outside.

"Ah... yes, ma'am..." Carter hesitated, "Only, he's also here with another gentleman who refuses to give his name."

"I know."

“Oh... right, well, it’s just that before we even had a chance to frisk him, he offered up his own weapon to be confiscated. We checked and he isn’t armed with anything else but... I don’t know, I just have a bad feeling about this, ma’am”, Carter said cautiously.

The Governor quietly mulled this new information over; her intrigue in this mysterious visitor now peaked such that it convinced her to take the risk and meet him.

“Thank-you, Carter. Please send them in”, she said.

“Yes, ma’am”, Carter said, leaving the office and shutting the door behind him, clearly knowing when to stall and when not to.

Watching the rain descend upon the city before her, the Governor frowned in thought and wondered, “What plot is afoot here?”

She then considered how best to greet the judge and this mystery person. It all depended on who he presented himself as; he could very well be the next Edward Snowden, or he could be some punk-nothing.

Not wanting to get her hopes up, she assumed that he was probably just a nobody. It was the thought of nobodies such as the one she was anticipating that made her think, “Fuck the Internet – weirdoes aren’t supposed to have a voice for a goddamn reason.”

The Governor did nothing to prepare for the meeting other than turn her chair to face her door. She didn’t have to do anything else; she was protected by the sheer power emanating from her desk of accented varnish and the backdrop of the grandest metropolis ever built by mankind behind her.

A few moments later, Carter opened the door and in entered the judge and this man of which she had no comprehension of.

Immediately, the body language of the two men screamed out to her. The judge, the aspiring leader and politician that he was, looked nervous and full of dread. The other man, dressed like a regular citizen, had an aura of confidence and seemed totally unfazed by the formidable office he had just entered. With a gaze as sharp as a knife, the Governor eyed up Lincoln.

“Gentlemen, please have a seat”, she said, gesturing to the chairs in front of her desk. The two men crossed the office to take their seats. Lincoln went over what he needed to say as he sat down and locked sternly into eye-contact with the Governor. For a few seconds, nobody said a word as the rain lashed heavily against the window.

“Well...” the Governor ended up saying, “You’ve got my curious attention, what is this all about?”

“I’ve come to blackmail you”, Lincoln said bluntly, using a tone on the Governor that very few dared to. A little stunned, the Governor broke her gaze with Lincoln for the first time and flashed suspicious eyes to the judge.

“Who is this man?” she asked him.

The judge sighed, “He caught me doing something I shouldn’t have – on camera.”

“And why is he here?”

“You’ll talk to me”, Lincoln interrupted. He wasn’t going to be ignored. He and the Governor returned to their face-off.

“Why are you here?” she asked with pursed lips.

“If I don’t get what I want, I’ll release the footage online, he’ll go to prison, and you’ll be politically humiliated”, Lincoln said.

“This video evidence – what did you catch him doing?”

“Using the services of a Brooklyn prostitute.”

At this revelation, the Governor spat a hateful look at the judge, “You *fool*.”

The judge could only sit in humiliating silence. The Governor then paused and regained her composure. It all depended on what this blackmailer of hers wanted, but she quickly listed her options in her head:

1. Give him what he wants – resolve this mess here and now.
2. Deny him – let the judge take the fall and try spin this scandal positively.
3. Kill him.

She'd been in the political game a long time, but even still, she had never had to resort to option three. However, she knew others that had and she knew how to get it done if need be...

“What’s your name, son?” she then asked, trying to regain control.

“You don’t need to know”, Lincoln replied.

“It’s Lincoln”, the judge chimed in, much to Lincoln’s annoyance, “I overheard the hooker say it.”

“Lincoln, I wonder; how is it you came to film Mr Locke here? How did you know he would be meeting this prostitute?” the Governor asked.

“It’s not important. What’s important is that it happened”, Lincoln said.

“Oh, I disagree”, the Governor said calmly, somewhat worrying Lincoln, “You see, this may come as a surprise to you, but you’re not the first jackass to come in here and lay down some sort of ultimatum to me. Chances are you won’t be the last either. So, I suspect I’ve actually had far more experience in these kinds of situations than you, kiddo, and what I’ve learnt is that the manner in which the blackmailer gained their ‘evidence’ does, in fact, have some impact on how they can actually use that evidence.”

“If you think I’d be afraid to announce to the world that I too was breaking the law, then your experience isn’t worth anything”, Lincoln snapped back.

“So you were using the services of this whore too, I take it?” the Governor asked.

“They’re in love”, the judge said, adding his two cents again.

“Really?” the Governor asked, a smugness present in her voice, “You love this hooker, Lincoln, yet you’re prepared to jeopardize her freedom, as well as your own, just to bring myself and Mr Locke down? Do I have this right?”

“No. I don’t want to bring you down, that’s incidental. I don’t care how corrupt you two assholes are. But the public will. You don’t give me what I want and this son of a bitch becomes the next Internet sensation and you become a laughing stock”, Lincoln

said, doing his best to match the Governor for steadiness of demeanor. He chose not to disclose to them that Edie was now safely out of the equation.

“No, you won’t do that”, she said.

“What makes you so sure?” he asked.

“Threatening to release that video is the only way you can achieve your goal. Now, granted, I haven’t asked yet what that goal is, but I suspect it’s very important to you. So let’s say that I don’t yield to your demand, whatever it is, what happens then, Lincoln? You release the video, ruin four people’s lives to varying extents, mine least of all – I have a very good PR team, we can turn this into a victory for me; ‘such is the extent of the corruption in New York that it even affects me on a personal level, but even though it was a tremendously embarrassing event, I still rose up to it and stamped it out’. You see? I’ve weathered worse storms than this. So you go ahead and release your video, and then what? You still aren’t any closer to achieving your goal, are you?”

The Governor was good. She possessed a tenacious intellect, honed over decades to protect itself. Lincoln truly had entered the realm of a new kind of person.

“What’s happening here, kid, is that you’re quickly realizing with each word I speak just how empty your threat really is and just how stupid you really are”, she added.

But Lincoln also hadn’t come this far without thinking it through first. He too had listed her three options in his head and, despite how it sounded, he was choosing his words very carefully. She didn’t realize it yet, but the Governor was walking directly down the path Lincoln wanted her to. Having a plan and knowing it was working helped him steel his nerves while he kept acting like she’d gotten the better of him.

“So, we come to the million dollar question; what do you want, Lincoln?” she asked.

“Introduce me to the most powerful person you know”, Lincoln answered without so much as a blink.

It was most definitely not what the Governor had expected him to say. She and the judge exchanged puzzled looks.

“Excuse me?” she then asked.

“You heard.”

“You want me to introduce you to someone?”

“The most powerful person you know.”

“Why?” the Governor asked with a dark frown.

“You don’t need to know”, Lincoln said. The Governor had clearly never been dealt such a bizarre hand, her poker face momentarily slipping, giving herself away ever so slightly. She had gone from imposing to inquisitive.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘powerful?’” she asked, making Lincoln smile a little.

“Good question. You’re right to ask it. Power is vague without purpose. Power is merely energy, or indeed the accumulation and projection of such. The Universe *is* energy. It coalesces and conjures life. So, who do you who has seized more of the Universe than any other? Who do you know who impacts more lives than anyone else? Who do you know who plays God the most convincingly?”

The Governor paused as she interpreted Lincoln’s explanation. He had essentially said nothing – yet she knew precisely what he meant.

“You expect to meet God because you have a video and a speech?” she mocked.

“Something like that”, Lincoln said.

“You’re out of your goddamn mind”, she said, “Do you have any idea who the kind of people I deal with on a daily basis are, let alone the *most* powerful of them?”

“Why else do you think I came to you?” Lincoln asked.

“You don’t have the faintest fucking clue what the hell you’re doing. You’re just some piece of shit in love with a filthy whore. You did nothing to earn to be here. There’s a natural order to things. You have no right to even be in the same room as me”, the Governor said. Lincoln took the insults on the chin; he was used to people belittling him and so far had found that they usually did so right before doing exactly what he wanted them to.

“Introduce me to someone or I’ll leave”, he said.

“Who? Huh? Who would suffice? You want a meeting with the President? The Secretary of Defence? You think I can just call them and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got some asshole here that wants to meet you?’ These kinds of people aren’t just sitting around twiddling their thumbs waiting for morons like you to come waltzing up to them! They live in an entirely different world to the likes of you!” the Governor ranted angrily, much to Lincoln’s delight. The further infuriated she became, the more she was likely to do just as Lincoln hoped.

“I hate to shatter the illusion in which you live in, depend on, but it’s the exact same godforsaken world, Governor. They eat, they breathe, and they die – just like me, just like you. So you’ll introduce me to whoever you can. Is that understood?” he said.

“You’re the most disrespectful little shit I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting”, the Governor replied.

“I’ll take that as a compliment”, Lincoln said sarcastically.

“This introduction – what’s it for?” she asked.

“None of your business.”

“Listen here, sonny, if you’re going to stroll in here and ask me to introdu–”

“Ask?” Lincoln interrupted, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ‘ask’ you anything. Introduce me to the most powerful person you know, or else.” His deliberate rudeness was making the Governor blind with rage. She couldn’t see he was using himself as bait for her own agitated ego.

“Or else?” the Governor asked with a clenched jaw.

“Yeah”, Lincoln said.

“Fuck you. *Fuck you!* Show people your video. Then watch as I crush you”, the Governor snarled. At this, the judge broke his silence for a third time.

“Samantha... c’mon”, he begged.

“Get back on the street – both of you”, she said, keeping her eyes fixed on Lincoln.

“Sam, please. I’ve always done right by you”, the judge pleaded, “Just give him five minutes with someone.”

“Are you telling me what to do?” she asked, shooting him an evil glare.

“So that’s it? You’re just going to cast me into the fire after everything I’ve ever done for you?” the judge said.

“Oh, I think we both know you’ve dived headfirst into this flame all by yourself”, she said coldly, effectively condemning him to a prison sentence.

“Sam...” the judge said, “I have kids...”

The Governor paused for a moment; the judge looked so pathetic, but he’d managed to reach some part of her hardened soul – sort of. She played everything out in her mind before giving her attention back to Lincoln.

The judge’s plea for mercy had made her settle on option three, but she had to make it seem like option one for it to work.

Her failure was that she had underestimated Lincoln completely and utterly. He had goaded her into this decision – and fairly easily too. The chess master in the park would be proud of him. So fine was this manipulation of the Governor that she thought she was acting of her own free will.

“I can’t introduce you to anyone, I’m far too busy. But I can give you someone’s contact details. You’d just have to tell them I sent you. Would that satisfy you?” she asked with a taste foul distain on her tongue.

“Who?” Lincoln asked.

“Michael Rempah.”

“The billionaire?”

“That’s right – the billionaire”, the Governor said, trying to hide the fiendish look of unbridled glee in her eye. The thought of a man such as Michael Rempah ‘taking care’ of a man such as Lincoln-the-nobody restored her faith in the ‘natural order’ of things.

“Well, give me his details and you’ll never see me again”, Lincoln said, using a very deliberate choice of words.

“It doesn’t quite work like that”, the Governor said. She reached over to a draw in her desk and pulled it out slowly. Lincoln watched on curiously, the storm outside now lashing rain heavily against the window.

In the draw was a series of cellphones. The Governor carefully selected one before shutting the draw and turning back to Lincoln. She slid the phone across her wooden desk to him and said, “There’s one number on that phone.”

The theatrics confirmed for Lincoln that the Governor was setting him up. He picked the phone up off the desk and slid it in his pocket. He then gave a sly look to both his victims.

“I’ll delete the video once I’ve spoken to Mr Rempah”, he said.

“Very well”, the Governor conceded.

“What? No! Make him delete it now!” the judge said in bewilderment, having not caught onto what the Governor was up to. Neither Lincoln nor the Governor acknowledged his protest, they simply stared each other down. If there was ever a moment for the Governor to realize that Lincoln had played her, this was it. However, Lincoln broke the stare before he could tell if she had figured him out or not. To keep poking the hornet’s nest was not his aim, so he got to his feet.

“Governor”, he said with a slight nod of the head before turning his back on her. Lincoln left the office as the judge continued to grapple with had just happened.

In the hallway near the elevators, Lincoln saw Carter and two other security officials standing around. Their slouched postures changed when they saw him approaching.

“Hello, sir”, Carter said.

“Gentlemen”, Lincoln said to them as he reached forward to push the down arrow. He stood and waited, feeling their eyes on him.

“If you want your property back, sir, you’ll have to contact the—” Carter began.

“You keep it”, Lincoln said, cutting him off. The elevator arrived with the ring of a bell and the warm light flooded the hallway as the doors parted. Lincoln stepped in and, as the doors closed, the three distrusting pairs of eyes watched Lincoln disappear.

After the elevator ride to the ground floor, he stepped out into the grand, spacious lobby. It was totally deserted and his footsteps echoed.

Coming to the manic streets, Lincoln watched as the rain come down in a violent current. People ran, hid under scaffolding and umbrellas, some were already selling rain jackets – they must’ve known the storm was coming. Lincoln stepped over a gushing drain and crossed onto the pavement of Park Avenue.

In New York, Lincoln often found himself being bombarded by abstract philosophy, conflicting views on life, love and madness, bits of graffiti, half-heard parts of conversations, the sheer presentation of so many people, these all acted as outlets of wisdom – both optimistic and cynical. It scrambled his brain and, as such, he walked a block or two before he realized what he was doing. Without thinking, he’d been swept up in the rain-craze.

He looked up to the sky between the towering structures through which the rain cascaded around and down. It had grown dark quickly. Water splashing his face, his mind turned at last to the billionaire. He needed some place to sit and think for a moment. Looking around, he saw some steps leading down to a bar off the sidewalk. The weather and the lure of a beer ushered him inside.

In the relative quiet and comfort of Paddy’s, Lincoln ordered a pint and sat in the darkest, loneliest corner he could find. With the chatter and laughter from other patrons softly droning on, he was able to finally process what had just happened and what was to come. He took the cellphone the Governor had given him out of his pocket and placed it on the table next to his beer.

It didn’t surprise him that it was Rempah to whom the Governor had chosen to outsource her dirty work. The infamous owner of a vast number of companies was

easily the shadiest 'legitimate' billionaire on the entire East Coast. Inheriting the reins of his father's consultancy firm, Michael had, with seemingly insatiable levels of greed, overseen the brutal and ethically bankrupt expansion of the Rempah business portfolio.

From what Lincoln had read and seen of Rempah on television, his philosophy was based on a heartless interpretation of evolution by natural selection – simple and uncomplicated. Mankind had never truly left the jungle, therefore the rules of the animal kingdom still applied; the strong survived while the weak withered and died. He didn't seem to believe in notions such as 'compassion is true might'.

It wasn't hard then to see why Rempah relished capitalism, basking unapologetically in its shortcomings and humanity's collective failure to find a better societal alternative. The free market, the best solution to the problem of how to govern civilization, was a plaything to him.

Rempah championed free enterprise, not because he believed in people's abilities or rights to better themselves, but because it allowed for their more profitable exploitation. It meant he could be vicious yet still be law-abiding. He was under no illusions either as to what kind of person he was, succinctly summing up his own story in his autobiography with:

"Socialists call me a sociopath – they say I'm sick. I'm not sick. I'm a symptom of a world that's sick."

It was as if he was living lavishly on purpose to incite a revolution, like some sort of satirical aristocrat, like he was trying to prove to the world just how ill it had become if monsters such as him were able to live without fear. Rempah, it almost seemed, was doing to the free world what Lincoln had done to the Governor – being confrontational in the hope of violent backlash.

"But supposing a popular uprising did occur, how will Rempah escape its wrath?" Lincoln thought, "And, more importantly, how are you going to escape his?"

Chapter Seven

™ H € B I € € I O N A I ® €

Sipping his cold beer, Lincoln looked around at the other people in the pub. None of them had any idea there was a dead man watching them, about to kill himself with a phone call.

The beer tasted good. Lincoln felt he'd earned it and he suspected it could be his very last. And, by the time he slid the empty glass a few inches across the table, he had had an idea.

“Charm him”, Lincoln mused, “Charm the bastard.”

A handsome young man at the bar, on a date with some belle, had given Lincoln the inspiration. He studied the way this dapper young gentleman dressed; a suave, understated arrogance that matched the fashion in which he held his body, darted his dark eyes, smiled, let his focus flitter between his babe to his own sense of cool. It was intriguing to watch, and to the girl it was mesmerizing.

Observing this love, or lust, then made Lincoln think for a moment of Edie and his ex-wife. They were out there, somewhere. Sad nostalgia; seeing them in his mind's eye. His thoughts swept him into in their hair, rich and warm like the earth, skin of soft sweetness, deep eyes of sadness and love – kind smiles... gone. Except Edie, she still lingered in the mist of his memory.

When she had pleaded with him to stay, sobbing on the floor of that room, Lincoln had had no choice but to break her heart. She'd simply asked at precisely the wrong

moment. If she had broken her silence before the wheels were in motion, things could have been different – perhaps.

Now, however, there was a chance to retreat, to prevent their memories of each other from becoming stone ruins in white dust. A reprieve in the assault against the gleaming tower of influence had presented itself, a moment for a beer, a moment of fresh air amongst the smog filled ocean of deceit and bullshit into which he had dived headfirst.

“Do I quit now with my life? Do I find the girl and abandon this lunacy? How far down the rabbit hole do I want to go?” he wondered – “How far *does* it go?”

And with that curiosity – Lincoln knew he couldn’t quit. If he were to one day become an old man, that question would plague his mind, like an infection. It would constantly be in the corner of his eye, something standing just behind him. He wouldn’t be able to see it, he’d just feel its presence, feel it breathing on his neck. He’d die a sick and restless man, despite the love of all the Edies in all the world.

“Don’t quit now”, he told himself, letting Edie walk away from his thoughts. She became grey and distant, off to occupy that same half-dead space that his ex-wife did.

Lincoln forced himself to refocus.

The cellphone on the table stared up at him, taunting him. All he had wanted for the last 48 hours or so was the single number it held – yet he had no idea what to do with it now that he had it. Not only that, but a cold fear had crept into him, an emotion which he had assumed he could no longer feel.

“Why be afraid now? Get another beer.”

Walking over to the bar and ordering another beer, Lincoln glanced over to the stylish cat nearby making his girl purr. He realized then that the bravado he’d displayed towards Edie, the judge and the Governor wouldn’t work on the billionaire.

“How do I charm him? What is he unguarded against?”

Studying the girl for a moment – as she sipped her drink through a pink straw, as she stirred the ice in her glass with it, with that unmistakable look in her eye, with aching honesty in her attraction – an idea struck Lincoln.

“The truth! That’s what he won’t be used to. Come clean. Tell him everything”, he thought, the plan quickly formulating in his head, “Perhaps he’ll find your honest, no nonsense approach refreshing, endearing. It might just make him stop and think about sparing your life... Maybe.”

Soothing his worries somewhat with sweet, sweet beer, Lincoln returned with his pint to the dark corner of the pub. He looked around; nobody had the faintest idea of the absurd nightmare he had gotten himself into.

“And you’re just about to make it a whole lot worse...”

Annoyed at the fear which was stopping him from making his call, Lincoln swiftly picked up the cellphone and turned it on. The Governor hadn’t lied, there was only one number and it was saved under the name ‘Machiavelli Rempah’. Before hitting dial, Lincoln took a large sip of his beer, drinking in whatever courage it could offer him. The phone rang, that droning in his ear - like a drill boring deep into his skull.

“Samantha! How are you?” the billionaire answered, he sounded jolly. Lincoln was a little relieved to hear that his adversary was seemingly in a good mood.

“Is this Michael Rempah?” he asked.

“Who is this?” the billionaire replied after a short pause.

“My name is Lincoln. I blackmailed Governor Williams into introducing me to someone more powerful than herself. She gave me your details. However, I believe she did this so that you can have me killed”, Lincoln said. There was nothing but a long echoing silence on the other end of the phone. It was deafening.

“Stay where you are, Lincoln. I’ll have someone collect you”, the billionaire replied. Before Lincoln could respond, the billionaire hung up, leaving Lincoln full of questions.

“How do they know where you are? Who is coming to collect you? What does ‘collect’ even mean?” he wondered, his head spinning. He was instantly filled with dread.

A surreal sensation overcame Lincoln. It surged over the gutter, over the sidewalk, down the steps into Paddy’s, along the floor of the pub, before it leapt up and submerged him in his dark corner. All the wood in the pub went grey, the Irish jig playing overhead went silent, everyone froze – even the couple in the color of love. The mindless chatter of the patrons fell away. Nothing seemed real anymore. The world had, or so it seemed, abandoned him – retribution perhaps, for his decision to abandon it.

Gradually, the hues and flow returned...

Every time the door to the pub opened, Lincoln quickly checked to see who it was. He had no idea who he was expecting to come and ‘collect’ him, but he assumed he’d know when he saw them.

At some point during this agonising wait, the young lovers left the bar. Lincoln watched as they walked off into their own New York love story.

“That could’ve been you...” he caught himself lamenting, “Instead, here you are, ‘fighting’ for the common people. The common people who couldn’t give a damn about their own damnation. They’re not going to thank you. They’re not even going to know you tried.”

Lincoln decided to end his pint but buy no more. If he was going to do battle with the billionaire he needed his wits to be sharp.

“Cigarettes... cigarettes would be good...” he thought.

Before he had a chance to act upon this impulse, Lincoln saw a man enter the pub who looked nothing like those who had wandered in before him. This man, a kind of upperclass henchman, was wearing a fine suit, crisp whites against charcoal blacks. Although the rain was pouring down outside, he was dry, an umbrella at his side. He was somewhere in his late thirties, clean cut and clean shaven.

Lincoln kept his head low, but maintained a watchful gaze. He briefly regretted handing his weapon over to Carter and the Governor's security detail, but reminded himself that a shootout would solve nothing. He didn't want to survive and find out nothing about the world. He wanted to know – *know* – who pulled the strings and why they did it. He wanted to know who drove the machine and where they thought they were driving it. Death was his second desire to all of this.

The henchman walked casually over to the bar. He ordered a beer and remained standing to drink it. He didn't scan the surroundings – he did not appear to be looking for anyone. However, Lincoln decided to continue with his open book policy and wandered up to the bar.

Standing a few bar stools away from the man, he poured himself a glass of water. The henchman maintained a determined interest in the television which quietly played some European football match.

“So, who are you?” Lincoln asked him. The henchman smiled as he kept his eyes on the game, the situation demanded a smile.

“You must be this Lincoln character”, he then said.

“ I must?”

“A few more minutes to finish my beer would've been appreciated”, the henchman said before turning to leave the pub without so much as looking at Lincoln.

“Follow me”, he said, heading for the steps leading up to the sidewalk.

“Where are we going?” Lincoln asked suspiciously. The henchman paused and looked at Lincoln for the first time, unimpressed with what he saw.

“If you come with me, you'll see”, he answered.

“And if I don't?”

The henchman smiled again. He seemed fond of smiling.

“If you don’t, Mr Rempah will come to you. Wherever you are. He hates having his time wasted, so I suggest you do what he asks”, he said. The condescension agitated Lincoln – this asshole was just an errand boy, Armani suit regardless.

“Well then, if you don’t want an angry boss, you’ll tell me where we’re going”, Lincoln said.

“The Woolworth Building”, the henchman said with a bored sigh, “There’s a car waiting outside.”

“Was that so hard?” Lincoln asked, returning the patronising ‘fuck you’. Ignoring the insult, the henchman led Lincoln out of the pub and back onto the dark, wet streets of New York. It was sheer chaos at street level – night, light, people, cars, rain – chaos Lincoln and the man shielded from underneath the umbrella. He walked Lincoln over to a green Jaguar idling on the side of Park Avenue. Having the door opened for him, Lincoln stepped into the car as though he were royalty.

“Royalty”, he thought, like Louis XVI, the French king who was led to the guillotine.

The interior of the British luxury car was nothing short of perfection: seats of beige leather and all the modern electronics required for a journey of pure comfort. The driver offered Lincoln a subtle nod as they caught eyes in the rear-vision mirror. The henchman sat in the passenger seat in the front, making Lincoln feel somewhat more at ease. Cool Ethiopian jazz played quietly on the stereo system; the bass was thick and droning and the keyboard was jarring.

“Who chose this music?” Lincoln wondered, “The henchman, the driver, or the billionaire?”

Nobody in the vehicle spoke as it pulled into the heaving nighttime traffic. Inside the Jaguar was an oasis of calm and wealth, slowly crawling through the wet frenzy of the masses outside. Thousands of people living out thousands of lives. Watching those whom he considered to be his brothers and sisters rush about in the madness, it suddenly struck Lincoln how bizarre his last few days and hours had been. It was like he was in a

dream, or a nightmare. He was half-awake, taking in bits of his surroundings which were melting together with his imagination to create some other kind of world in his mind.

“GPS in the phone – is that how you knew where to find me?” Lincoln then asked, keeping his gaze on the zoo through the window. The henchman darted his eyes to the rear-vision mirror to catch Lincoln’s and then nodded with obvious boredom. Reaching into his pocket, Lincoln took out the cellphone. With his bare hands, he snapped it in half, briefly catching the attention of the henchman and the driver. Dropping the window ever so slightly, he slid the broken bits of phone out into the rain and concrete of Lexington Avenue. The move earned barely a collective raised eyebrow from the other two in the car. It was clear that they spent most of their time chaperoning the billionaire’s ‘stuff’ around and had seen it all before.

Thinking of cellphones, Lincoln checked his own. He wanted to e-mail himself a copy of the video of the judge, just in case he needed a saved version one day – unlikely though it was. However, when he went to access the file, he found it had vanished. He most certainly hadn’t deleted it himself and there was no way anyone else could have used his phone. Bewildered, Lincoln’s heart began to speed up, matching the pace the green Jaguar found along some stretch of Manhattan.

“Where the hell did it go? What happened to it?” he wondered. A feeling of dread overcame him as he began to accept the likeliest explanation: the Governor or the billionaire had hacked into his phone and deleted it. It didn’t scare Lincoln that they were capable of such a thing, what scared him was the idea that there were other aspects of his life they could reach their tentacles into and extract whatever they wanted...

Having no more use for his phone and not wanting to be traced by it again, he condemned it to the same fate of the other. Two broken phones were now Lexington Avenue road kill.

The Woolworth Building, once the tallest on the planet, still loomed over the streets of Lower Manhattan. The gothic revival form was now reflected in the blue glass of the

much taller, modern phoenix of the World Trade Center, but it cast its shadow of might just as convincingly as it did a century ago. It was a grand testament to American power and wealth – like a medieval castle, the keep, amidst the dystopian heights of the commercial third millennium. But – although the gargoyles perched on the outside watched over the citizens, keeping them safe – the gargoyles lurking inside looked out only for themselves.

It was at the foot of this sculpture of the skies that the deep green Jaguar pulled up outside of and came to a stop. The rain was blocked a little by the high-rises, enough anyway for Lincoln to step out quickly before having to wait for the henchman and his umbrella. Standing on Broadway, Lincoln glanced up at the white tower, lit up like a ghost against the black, wet sky. It was an evil looking sight, majestic and beautiful too.

Specks of rain hit Lincoln's face, like cold pins flying through the air. He took his eyes off the glimmering green roof of the building and looked down to the ground level entrance. The henchman got out of the Jaguar and ducked his head under his umbrella.

“He's waiting, Lincoln, let's go”, he said. He led Lincoln underneath and through the imposing stone archway entrance, like an alcove of Notre Dame in Paris. A revolving door of gold revealed a grand lobby. Marble pillars and red velvet rope framed the inside. A golden reception stood in the middle of the vast atrium and a well dressed young woman stood to greet them.

“Evening, gentlemen”, she said. It was like they had walked back in time, back to the 19th century – into an era of feudalism, of royalty, of monarchs. Lincoln couldn't help but think of Edie's brothel in Greenpoint and how far away it seemed...

“Good evening”, the henchman said to her as he led Lincoln to a series of elevators. Waiting for their gilded cage to arrive and transport them into the heavens, where it seemed God must reside, the two stood in silence – one in a fine suit, the other looking like an unloved sixties folk singer. The elevator arrived and the men began their journey to the clouds.

“Rempah owns the penthouse?” Lincoln asked.

“He owns the building”, the henchman replied with an air of cool. He liked being a minion. It gave his life a purpose it had always lacked, and he enjoyed eating from the plate of Rempah’s status.

The elevator finally came to the end of its climb. The henchman continued to lead Lincoln towards the presence of the billionaire, down a hallway of ancient wood and bronze, everything crafted by hand and by pain and by money. They eventually came to a door which required a key. The henchman unlocked the door and opened Lincoln’s eyes to the world of sickening riches.

There was art, masterpieces, dripping from the walls. Paintings by maestros and sculptures from the Renaissance, artifacts from Ancient Egypt, Homeric Greece – the billionaire had more than mere wealth in his palace of the sky, he had treasure. He owned pieces of human history, things which could never be replaced. Sword collections from across the European Dark and Islamic Golden Ages, some probably used in the Crusades, decorated the corridors. It was a maze of rooms and hallways, each with silks and rugs. There were books over a thousand years old, the sole copies of their subjects, written in languages now dead. All the decorations a regular person might find in their own romanticized ideas of the age of kings.

The henchman pressed on an intercom at the end of some wing full of alcoves with Napoleonic-era manikins, with muskets, pikes, dragoon helmets and brightly colored uniforms and feathers – peacocks of the wars of the past.

“Mr Rempah, Lincoln is here to see you”, he said to the intercom.

“Level seven”, said the billionaire’s voice a few seconds later.

The henchman turned to Lincoln, “This way.”

Coming to a magnificent main staircase at the centre of the penthouse, the two climbed up on foot, past statues and a grandfather clock – it was 11.39pm. Their footsteps echoed about the staircase. As they climbed several flights, each one darker

than the last, Lincoln wondered what had happened to the elevators. He then realized it was probably a deliberate move on the billionaire's part; making the guest walk up to him, tiring them out of any dignified composure. With each step, however, Lincoln found himself losing not his breath – but his nerve. It was the most daunting walk of his life. At least when he had served in the Middle East he had an M16 in his dead hands. But now – now he just had dead hands.

As they neared the ninth level of the luxury penthouse suite, a piercing voice made Lincoln's bones go cold.

“Lincoln! Here boy!” the billionaire called out. The henchman continued to walk towards the source of this booming, chilling call. Lincoln followed but wondered, “Will I see midnight?”

The two men came to their first window since being in the penthouse. The view was simply astounding – made more inspiring than that of the Governor by the simple fact that this was someone's home. Their home, with the modern Rome, the futuristic Uruk, laid out before it. The rain continued to fall, two hundred metres in the sky, and it swirled in the high winds.

Then, by a doorway that led to a vast open room, the henchman came to a stop. He turned to Lincoln with an expressionless face and said, “Mr Rempah is through here.”

Lincoln returned the pale gaze and treaded slowly through the open doorway. He knew this wasn't the very top floor in the penthouse because he could see doors leading to the stone balconies outside. From the gutter, drunk, he had stared up at this building many times and he knew whereabouts he stood within it. He looked around the room, which was dark, though the lights illuminating the outside of the building offered a thin veil of visibility. Even in this light, however, there was no sight of the billionaire – just art everywhere.

“Where is he?” Lincoln wondered.

“Lincoln!”

Spinning on his heels to face the direction from which his name was called, Lincoln then saw him: the billionaire was lounging in a leather chair, in a robe, reading a book and – from the smell in the room – he was drunk.

“Lincoln! You fucking crazy bastard! Have a seat!” the billionaire shouted excitedly. He looked nothing like the man who appeared in Forbes, more like how Lincoln himself had looked like just a few days ago; dishevelled, boozed. There were key differences though; the billionaire was drunk off four hundred year old wine in his \$100 million home and he wasn’t miserable – he was exuberant in the grip of his poisoned elixir.

Lincoln sat down on another leather chair, opposite the billionaire. For a tense few seconds they said nothing, other than screaming at each other with their eyes. The billionaire’s eyes were black and dead and looked like stone.

“Whaddya think of my home, huh? Pretty fucking amazing, right?” the billionaire eventually asked, fixing his robe to sit decently across his waist.

“Yes, it’s lovely”, Lincoln replied, unsure of how to navigate these turbulent waters he’d found himself in.

“You wanna drink? You wanna drink? I got butlers who’ll get you a drink. Whole team of drones watching us now – cameras and shit. All I gotta do is say I wanna drink and some idiot comes up here with a drink. Anything you want. Coke. Heroin. Girls. Whaddeva you want, some jumped up monkey will bring it to us”, the billionaire rambled.

“No, I’m fine thank-you, sir”, Lincoln said.

“You sure? I’ll get the fucking wine that Jesus Christ himself made outta water. I probably got that shit somewhere in here.”

“I’m fine, thank-you”, Lincoln repeated. His refusal for a drink offended the drunken billionaire somewhat, “What the fucks the madda with you? Huh? You come into the most illustrious house in the most illustrious city in the goddam world and you don’t wanna fucking drink? Huh?”

“It depends”, Lincoln said.

“On what does it depend?” the billionaire slurred back.

“Are you going to kill me? If you are, then yeah, I’ll have a drink. If not, then I’ll pass”, Lincoln said. After hearing this, the billionaire dropped his casual arrogance. He cleaned his teeth with his tongue and sat up straight.

“Okay, okay... So, before you say anything else, you should know that I already know everything there is to know about you. I know what you’ve been up to, I saw your video. I actually thought it was pretty funny. I’ve never liked that Locke prick, so I thought it was funny. Still, I deleted it... Anyway, I also know what you’ve been up to in the last ten years. I know you’re a veteran. I know you volunteered to be a killing machine for a bloodthirsty group of rich white men. ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’, ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ – you gotta be fucking kidding me! Yeah? Fuck me. Iraq the racket! I know you risked your life for several years – escorting defence contractors – so that filthy rich assholes could make a shit ton more money and make their oil buddies cum. You think you served a country? You served a company, a collective. You better not think that whoring yourself out to the people who made the US military their gangbangers makes me respect you. But I also know that the only people in this world who ever loved you are all gone. I know your parents are dead. I know your wife left you. I know you have no children. I know your only friend in this whole goddamn world is a hooker from Brooklyn. You’re nothing. Nobody would know if you died tonight. I know everything there is to know about you.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” Lincoln asked.

“I know why Williams sent you here. You really pissed her off and she wants you gone. I know that you’re on some moronic crusade to find the most powerful person in the world and that is what led you to Locke, then to her, and now to me.”

“Who is the most powerful person you know?” Lincoln asked calmly, much to the billionaire’s amusement. He laughed and drank more of his expensive wine.

“Why? Why are you doing this?” the billionaire asked.

“I want to look them in the eye and tell them that I matter”, Lincoln said. At this, the billionaire spat about fifteen thousand dollars worth of wine out of his mouth as he began to laugh hysterically. Of all the reactions to Lincoln’s plan so far, this one was the most humiliating. He wiped a few hundred dollar specks of wine-spit off his cheek.

“Oh my God! Oh my God! That is the single stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard!” the billionaire exclaimed, “Lemme make this real easy for you: you *don’t* matter! You. Don’t. Matter. I matter, you do not. You got it?”

“The most valuable resource in the world is the human being”, Lincoln said calmly.

“No – people are only valuable in large numbers. Individuals, like you, are as expendable as a... as a McDonald’s fucking cheeseburger wrapper. You see, people are different to all other resources in that they know they will come to an end. Oil, gold, rubber – these don’t know they’re finite. People know they are. People know they’re mortal, that they die. So, you have a situation where a valuable resource also feels vulnerable. This vulnerability makes them easy to manipulate. This is the basis of power, just like plunder is the basis of capital. You don’t needa scare people in order to impose draconian systems on em, they’re already scared so they demand the draconian systems. They think it’s good for them. You see, people are fucking stupid. People are really, really goddamn fucking stupid. You have no idea how painfully stupid most people are. We haven’t survived because we are smart, we’ve survived because we can suffer. That’s our greatest survival skill; our ability to cope with almost any situation, to suffer through it. Not brains. Not the idea to make clothes, but the ability to suffer through the cold long enough to figure out to wrap shit around us. This keeps us alive; endurance. But it also prevents us from lashing out at the very thing that is imposing suffering upon us. We knuckle under, we become subservient. We do what we’re told. So this is what makes humans valuable, but again – only in large numbers. Individuals can get fucked. I know it’s probably hard for you to accept, you know, because your life is yours and it feels like

it means something, but it doesn't. It doesn't mean shit. Everything you've ever done, Lincoln, is as inconsequential as it is trivial."

The billionaire was on a roll, lubricated by booze. Lincoln ignored the insults and instead of hitting back at them, he decided to keep the billionaire ranting, hoping it would open up a way in.

"What is the most valuable resource then, if it isn't people?" he asked.

"Time."

"Time?"

"It's what humans are worried will run out for them. It gives value to them. It gives value or takes it away from everything – like this wine – as well as being valuable itself; with enough time, literally anything is possible. "Time is the grand author of all things", the billionaire said.

"That's a lovely phrase – is it yours?" Lincoln asked.

"It's in that book I was reading", the billionaire said, gesturing drunkenly to the book he had put down upon Lincoln's arrival. Lincoln looked at it and read the title.

"The Stages of Empires in the Theatre of Time" he said.

"Foundation, expansion, trade, wealth, intellect, indulgence and decline. Guess what stage America is in."

Lincoln knew the answer but played dumb so not to stall the billionaire from talking endlessly, "Affluence?"

"Indulgence. A stage typified in nearly all empires by an obsession with food and sex. We've never been fatter or more obnoxious with our love of food, gourmet this and organic that, and the greatest tool ever invented, the Internet, is primarily used to deliver an ever-increasingly Sodomitic and depraved array of pornographic bullshit to an oversexed, gluten-free youth. We – America, the West – we're all fucked."

"Why does America have to follow the pattern of all the others?" Lincoln asked.

“Because we’re not as fucking special as we like to think we are”, the billionaire said coldly, “Don’t get me wrong, I want America, or the West or whatever it is, to survive. Not because I think it’s morally superior – it is somewhat to its own citizens, perhaps, but to the citizens outside of it, the West is just as evil as all those other power blocks that it despises. No, I want the West to survive so that I can continue to make insane amounts of money. But, unfortunately, the West will have its day of reckoning sooner or later – I have no doubts about that. The greatest decline since Rome. The age we live in doesn’t ensure that we’ll be the only anomaly empire in human history. Europe has raped the world and spawned a North America that has, in turn, raped the world too. All this plunder and apathy will not go un-repaid. The people who’ve been subjected to centuries of pillage will not forgive the West when it weakens under its own weight. Unless, *unless*, the single greatest act of kindness of all time is witnessed and the nations of Africa, South America and Asia forgive the West all its heinous acts, then the Western World is about to burn. And there will be people in the West who won’t understand why this is happening to them. They’ll think the other civilizations are evil, cruel, ignorant, when it is them that is ignorant. No, wait – not ignorant, ignorance is still as innocent as it always was. *Willful* ignorance, however, is among the most hateful crimes a person can commit. Willful ignorance helps sustain wars and genocides. If you choose to remain stupid, you’re a criminal the same as any dictator who chews at the rights of his people. Now, those who find that accusation most offensive, I guarantee you, they’re the ones who have buried their heads in the sand. They saw a glimpse of the world they were perpetuating, they knew it was horrendous, yet they did *nothing*. They smelt the blood soaking their hands and instead of washing them clean, they plugged their noses. But their desire to go back to a state of ignorance comes at a price – their souls.”

“What you’re suggesting is that every peasant is as guilty as Stalin”, Lincoln said.

“It is your duty as a human being to enlighten yourself, with relentless vigour, of the truths of the world. To resign otherwise does indeed make a Stalin of a peasant, yes.”

“But aren’t most people simply trying to look after their families?” Lincoln asked, “Does that really make them evil?”

“Yes. Yes, it does. And here’s why: they’re choosing to see their ‘families’ as those in their immediate experience. Is a man starving in the Congo not also their brother? Science would indicate so – that we’re all related. Those who say they’re too busy providing for their family are in denial that their family is, in reality, everyone. Those who say they’re too busy looking after their own are casting aside others in their family. Things will never change in this world so long as people are too afraid to hurt the feelings of others by not explaining to them that they are very much in the wrong. It is much more fun to simply go on ignoring the plight of the brother that you’re annoyed you have. I’m not afraid to speak the truth. You see, you think I’m an evil person. But I’m actually a very good person because I don’t live a lazy, hypocritical life. It’s the masses that do and are therefore evil, not me.”

“You expect a lot of people”, Lincoln said.

“People expect a lot more of each other than I do. People expect people to believe in a fake economy. People expect people not to rock the boat too much. People expect people to endure, to suffer, because ‘that’s how the world works’. ‘Oh, the banking system is just legalized fraud? Tough shit, that’s how the world works’. ‘Oh, socialism for the wealthy, capitalism for the poor? Tough shit, that’s how the world works’. ‘Oh, America is no longer a functioning democracy? Tough shit, that’s how the world works’. What I expect of people is nothing in comparison to that horse shit.”

The billionaire took another swig of his wine. He seemed satisfied with his drunken diatribe. A curious moment of quiet then befell the conversation.

“So”, Lincoln said, breaking the silence, “Should I have a drink or not?”

The billionaire stared at him for some time, saying nothing. A little steamed from all the booze and chaotic rambling, he remembered why Lincoln was here in the first place.

“I dunno if I’m gonna kill you, Lincoln. I honestly don’t. On one hand, I admire your guts. On the other hand, you make me sick with how stupid you are, poking your nose into a world you have no right to. Either I toss a coin or you try convince me to spare your pointless life, I honestly couldn’t care less”, the billionaire proposed.

Lincoln realized this was his moment. He briefly thought about how the chess master in the park would not approve of his next move; for no good chess player ever counts on luck. However, Lincoln thought he could predict the outcome with relative certainty – besides, he had no other ideas...

“Firstly, let me stress that you cannot possibly be more indifferent about my life than I am. I’m not here. I’m nothing but a sad ghost. But, I wonder... have you ever heard the story of Henry Tandey?” Lincoln asked.

“I’m listening”, the billionaire said.

“He was a British soldier in the First World War. Not just any soldier though, because by the time the war ended, he was the most highly decorated private in the entire British Empire. An incredibly brave man, winner of the Victoria Cross, among other things, and a killing machine for the King. The knife edge, the bullet tip, the vanguard of the most powerful empire in the world. Anyway, he manages to survive all his years and battles on the Western Front and makes it back home to England. He goes on and tries to get back to normal life, being a civilian in the re-civilized world. Does a better job at that than me. And, because of his war record, he’s got a bit of fame within the local community, you know, and he ends up recounting a particular event to people. He doesn’t want to be known as a cold-hearted killer, so he tells a story about a young German soldier who he spared in the first year of the war. After some battle, somewhere in France, he saw this young German soldier, wounded, trying to make his way back to his lines. Now, Tandey was a soldier – not a murderer – so when the German stopped and stared at him, and the two men locked eyes and all the world disappeared but for them, Tandey slowly lowered his rifle and let the German go. The German, prepared to

be killed, nodded in thanks and kept walking to his lines. Later on in life, as time goes on, Tandy becomes especially proud of this story of mercy when he discovers the fate of the German he spared. Etched in his memory, he recognizes the face of that German in the newspapers. His name is Adolf Hitler – and he’s leading the German people out of their vast depression... However, Tandy then becomes consumed with dark guilt when Hitler starts another world war which leads to the deaths of over seventy million people. His act of kindness led to industrialized genocide.”

“So, you’re saying I should kill you so you can’t commit crimes against humanity?” the billionaire asked, rather unimpressed with Lincoln’s story. Lincoln laughed a little.

“No. I’m saying that any theory of virtue would dictate that, even in retrospect, Henry Tandy still did the right thing. Evil is easy. Your thoughts on society and empire and money and power prove this. But I sense in you a desire to be better than evil. A hope, of a kind, for people. Despite your ruthless little businessman game. You see, Mr Rempah, it takes strength to reveal a perceived weakness, more strength than it could ever take to kill someone, especially someone like me. Evil takes no effort, but goodness demands greatness. So, are you going to be the great man you want to be, or are you going to be the lazy man you so despise?”

The billionaire was stunned.

“How did he turn this on me? And why did I get so damn drunk?” he thought. However Lincoln had done it, he had charmed the billionaire. He liked Lincoln’s smooth talking ways, his choice of words, his patience, his togetherness, his ruthlessness – his guts. They were all the qualities he liked about himself and he enjoyed seeing them embodied in someone else. It made him feel less alone in the world.

“Alright, I’ll introduce you to someone”, the billionaire finally said, “But I must warn you – once you meet a person like this, there is no going back to living a normal life. Chances are you’ll wish I had just killed you.”

Even though what the billionaire had just said could be interpreted as somewhat-reassuring words, Lincoln still didn't trust him. He wasn't completely confident in the moral dilemma he had presented the billionaire with, fearing it wouldn't withstand the wearing off of the aged alcohol.

He could still feel the cold horror of the Reaper's eyes upon him.

Chapter Eight
T H E M A S T E R

The green Jaguar pulled up outside Battery Park. The rain had stopped, but the night was yet to reach its darkest hour.

Stepping out of the car for the last time and shutting the door, Lincoln watched it drive off, back into the world of the wealthy. He looked through the row of towering buildings up at the Woolworth, looming in the distance with its green roof, Transylvanian-almost, needing just a crescent moon behind it, and wondered, “What does a billionaire do when he’s drunk and bored? What does he do when half-millennia-old alcohol starts to wear off? How does he get his kicks? This Vampire of Wall Street – am I really free from his teeth?”

Lincoln’s turned his back on the billionaire’s penthouse and walked alone through the oldest part of the city. It was quaint little New Amsterdam no more. Lincoln’s concerns drifted from the billionaire to that cold sense of unease he had always felt in this part of town, one he could never determine was merely a play of psychosomatic projection on his part, or if there was indeed merit to suspicious chill. The thin strips of sky between the metal castles of Wall Street always seemed grey, even in summer dusks. A hollow heartlessness, a belittlement, seemed to permeate down to street level. Gates and guards met the sidewalks, not cafes, not life. He’d never felt welcome here, shivers went down his spine, paranoia, that gross feeling of being watched – but from where and by whom? If there truly did exist an evil force in nature, in the world, this is where

Lincoln thought it must lair; in these tall iron-caves on this once-humble Manhattan edge.

Lincoln had asked to be let out of the Jaguar early, needing a short walk to gather his thoughts. He hadn't had much of an opportunity to think about what was happening since leaving the lavish madness of the Woolworth Building. Heading towards the Downtown Manhattan Heliport off the bottom of FDR Drive, his head was spinning faster than the rotors that were waiting for him. With the night air finally cool enough to be refreshing, he wandered, the parting words of the drunken billionaire echoing through his thoughts:

“He’s practically a ghost – a myth. I feel cold just talking about him. I couldn’t tell you his name because I don’t know it. I don’t know anyone that does. If – if – we choose to whisper about him, the names ‘The Master’ or ‘Elohim’ are used, the latter is some Hebrew word for God or something, but I don’t think he’s Jewish. Despite what some people might say, you still have to be human to be Jewish. This is no human, this is a ghoul. I have no idea of his age or the source of his wealth. And when I say wealth... he’s probably more valuable than Italy or the United Kingdom. Adam Smith talked of the economy’s invisible hand, well, this man is more like its invisible mind. You thought I was dangerous? Let me tell you something, Lincoln; I had one very brief encounter with him and it was about all the time that I ever want to spend in his presence. I felt sick around him, ill. How anyone could bear to be in his company for more than a few minutes – I honestly don’t know. You seem to know history, so I’ll assume you know of Rasputin. Well, I imagine that the ‘Mad Monk of Moscow’ wouldn’t last long either. There is an unholy feeling about a man with so much money and mystery; an ancient, unspoken evil, something we all once knew but have long since forgotten. Only when his eyes are on you, do you vaguely remember what it was and why it was forgotten. You probably think I’m crazy, but you’ll see what I’m talking about when you go there – and ‘there’ is all I know. I can’t tell you where his estate is, he’d have me killed if I even

uttered its location, but I can have sent you there. There are strict rules about visiting him, of course – and I intend to follow them. I'll need to tell him why you're coming. You'll need to be blindfolded. What he chooses to do with you, that's as much of a mystery as he is himself. The only remaining question is; do you still want to look the Master in the eye and tell him you matter?"

Lincoln kept walking, trying to work the chill down the back of his neck away. He couldn't, however, as it seemed to have become embedded in his bones. A fear in each notch of his spine, the unspoken 'thing' that the billionaire had uttered, it had crept out of his mouth and into Lincoln.

"Is he just messing with you?" Lincoln wondered, "Is he just trying to scare you before he kills you?"

There was only one sure way to find out.

Arriving at the mouth of the East River, at the end of the of the pier, Lincoln saw the billionaire's black helicopter waiting for him. The blades spun so fast they were invisible but for a blur. The machine-sound reminded him of his tours in the Middle East in the same way the sight would take most to Vietnam. If the prize wasn't to meet with the man the billionaire himself had spoken of so dreadfully, Lincoln wouldn't have gone anywhere near the helicopter, for everything told him to run in the opposite direction. However, this was it. There was nowhere else to go.

A man stood at the gateway to the pier and squinted through the night air as Lincoln walked closer.

"Are you Lincoln?" he called out.

"Yeah", Lincoln called back.

"This way, sir", the man called back, waving Lincoln through the gate and onto the pier.

Three questions crossed Lincoln's mind:

1. Why is the billionaire really bothering to do all of this for me?
2. Why did this guy just call me ‘sir’?
3. Is the answer to question one that they’re going to toss me into the black Atlantic?

With these questions blown back by the force of the copter’s blades, Lincoln stepped into the robotic bird. Two pilots sat in the front, uninterested in their latest passenger, while yet another henchman was already sat in the back. He had a black rope of fabric in his hands.

“Gotta put this on, sorry sir” he said to Lincoln, handing him the blindfold in an apologetic manner.

“Yeah”, was all Lincoln said. He grabbed the blindfold and took a final look at the metallic mountains of Manhattan, choosing their white lights, New York City, to be his final glimpse of the world in the event that this helicopter ride was indeed his doom-carriage, taking him to a final moment. Peeling his gaze off of the city and taking a deep breath, he threw his sight into darkness, wrapping the blindfold around his head. Tying a tight knot at the back, he pulled it down over his eyes, covering most of his face – like some kind of inverted insurgent.

He then felt his belt being done up tightly and handcuffs shackled firmly around his wrists. He couldn’t move more than an inch in any direction. If they were going to kill him, there was nothing he could now do to prevent it. With the blindfold shrouding him in darkness, he wouldn’t even know when his last breath would be taken.

The doors were soon shut, dulling the sounds of the blades above. Hearing the muffled chatter of the pilots, Lincoln then felt that unnatural feeling of flight. It was slow at first, then the pace and altitude increased rapidly. Despite his best efforts, his sense of direction lost itself and he couldn’t tell what compass arrow they were following. If he had to guess, he’d say north.

“Where are we headed?” he asked, thinking he’d try his luck. There was no reply so he asked again, “Where are we headed?”

An answer returned and surprised him some, “We’re under strict instructions not to talk to you, sir.”

“Doesn’t that count as talking to me?” he asked. This time there was silence again, echoed only by the drone of the helicopter.

With the repetitive machine noise and the enclosing darkness taking Lincoln off to either some unknown place of deep fabled power, or to the bottom of the ocean, a sense of sly ghoulishness entered his thoughts. He had suffered from sleep paralysis for several years since his time fighting in Iraq; the awful state of waking but being unable to move and feeling as though there is something or someone on your chest, or a figure of ill intent standing in the corner of your room, gradually making its way towards you. Being strapped in tight to his seat and having his hands cuffed was recreating this sensation. But there were key differences; he hadn’t been sleeping and he was preparing to confront the *thing* in the corner of his room.

“Look into its eyes”, he thought to himself.

Time soon lost all meaning on this journey. Lincoln had no idea how fast or slow, low or high they were. He didn’t know from one heartbeat to the next if he was about to die or if he would survive and indeed meet this person spoken of in frightening fashion by the billionaire. It was more like some avant-garde crisis of the soul than an actual flight anywhere.

In this black timeless space of fear and apprehension, he was reminded of a nightmare he had once had – the single worst one of his entire life. It was so detailed, more so than most memories of good things:

The room was dark and full of faces. The building was old, centuries perhaps. A curtain of rich crimson-velvet hung from an ornate white

ceiling. Watching the deep red veil with eager eyes were over two hundred and fifty people, dressed in their finest clothes. Framing the theatre stage were two large pillars of Greco-Romanic persuasion. Hush descended upon the seated viewers as the curtain slowly began to rise. Like an eyelid being gently opened to face a mirror. *THE BLACK SKELETONS* had been all the rave in the newspapers, there was no contemporary equal. Did the audience really know what they were in for? Tchaikovsky grandeur filled the theatre... but a young couple down the very back of the gallery paid no attention. A young man, in his late twenties, was captivated by the glimmering eyes of an equally aged miss. With blonde hair and gentle curves to play with, not even the *GREATEST SHOW IN MODERN TIMES* could distract him. It was simply a case of nature versus theatre. They seemed impossibly in love. He had picked her up earlier that night, taken her to dinner and then held her hand as they found their seats, way at the back, with nobody else around. My, how kisses feel good. They missed the splendid display of art on stage. Out of their lazy eyes, they saw flashes of masks of white and red and shadow. For brief moments they would watch the show, realize they had no idea what was happening, laugh, and then continue their sensations of skin. Tragedy and comedy played out before them, pain swept love, things lived and yearned and died again. Art was heartbroken and they never noticed. Before the show even entered its third act, the couple were out the door. They laughed loudly in the lobby and poured out onto the empty street. Love-drunk. In the chill of the night, the man offered the woman his coat. Before accepting the cliché, she made him aware that it was one. He smiled reached his arm around her shoulder and walked with her down the street. It was just passed ten o'clock – the night was as young as they were.

“Where would you like to go?”

“Where do you think?”

The man’s apartment was a few blocks away, so the walk gave them time to enjoy the quiet of night and that promise of lust’s fulfillment. Her heels clipped the sidewalk. It had been raining, but the stars were now visible. The dull black of the road shined with the streetlights hanging overhead. The world was alive. Soon they were in the warmth of an elevator. A busy hand pressed the floor number. The man led the woman to his door. In the chic apartment, overlooking some shimmering city, red wine went down with remaining inhibitions. She touched his strong face. He graced her skin with the back of his fingers. They were trembling already. A button undone.

“How about we move this into the bedroom?”

A question dressed in lace. Taking the lady by her porcelain hand, the man led her to where he slept each night. Gently, he lowered her onto the crisp white sheet on his bed. Her hair sprawled out behind her, like a flower. They were unable to see anything but beauty. The woman slowly undid her blouse, revealing where their beating hearts would meet. Unable to wait any longer, the man slid his arm underneath her and rolled her on top of him. Sensations of bliss: this is what humans can do for each other. Suddenly, however, the man froze – a horror in his eyes. The woman noticed and grew concerned. Was it something about her body that had caused this reaction?

“What’s wrong?”

The irises of his eyes were surrounded by white terror; how wide his eyes had become. He looked as sinister as what he was looking at. The woman grew in fear – panic – as the man simply stared, gasping in horror at whatever was behind her.

“ What’s wrong? You’re scaring me! ”

It was only when she tried to turn around to see for herself that the man sprung back into life. He held her close to save her from the sight.

“ We’re not alone. ”

Holding her tight, the man prevented his would-be lover from turning to see who else was in the room. Despite her screaming, he held her close.

“ Who is it? ”

It was too late to spare his own innocence, but she was saved from the sight because he held her – locked in white fear.

“ Describe to me what you see. ”

“ There stand two black skeletons. ”

“ What? ”

“ Two children, made of ash. Their ribs... they’re breathing... they’re alive...”

It was at this point in the nightmare that Lincoln had woken up. Instantly, he knew how to interpret such a bizarre creation of his subconscious; the two skeletons were the two little boys he’d shot in Fallujah after mistaking them for insurgents near a hospital. When he reached their bodies, they had been caught in a nearby explosion and had been burnt to black nothing. Lincoln would never know, could never know, if he or the flame had ultimately claimed them. He supposed it didn’t matter...

Reliving his worst nightmare over and over, the helicopter ride still did not end. Lincoln had no idea how long it had gone for, how long he had been in the room with those skeletons and that couple – whoever they were supposed to be. He simply fell further into the night, further into the black, cascading ever onwards into the abyss of machine noise – right into the very centre of mystery.

Eventually, after what seemed like an age, an age surrounded by the horrid ashen memories of a regretful past, the helicopter seemed to slow down. It weakened in speed

and drooped to a soft landing. The thumping of the air vibrations became thicker and slower, until they had the rhythm of a dying heart, and then they stopped altogether – the bird had settled at last.

Lincoln's breath quickened. "Why would they land only to kill me? What happens next?" he wondered.

The door to the helicopter slid open and bitterly cold air filled the cabin. The roar of ocean waves came too and made Lincoln ponder their location. "New England? Canada? Some villainous outcrop in the Atlantic?"

A few seconds later, Lincoln was being manhandled. His buckles were undone, his blindfold pulled tighter, and a firm hand clamped underneath each arm. "So much for being called 'sir'", he thought sarcastically to himself.

The crunch of a stone pathway was felt underfoot. Soon, all the elements were removed from Lincoln's senses – they were indoors now, in some manmade place, and the threat of imminent execution seemed momentarily muted by the walls. This all felt too elaborate for a drifter to be swept up in if not for some actual purpose, but he still felt the black-look on his shoulders.

"What happens next?" he wondered.

Doors were opened and halls unlocked, paths to secrets briefly lit before being blown back to dust. A stone maze that would take years to make and even more to solve was being undone before Lincoln's blinded feet.

Then, through the echoes of this castle of blackness, Lincoln heard music. Music – like he had heard in the dizzying heights of the Woolworth Building. Music – the last remnant of powerful people's connection to their souls, the only thing that binds them still to others and to this world. Music – their weakness, their last love, the only thing that can still make them feel.

It wasn't a recording, however. It was being played by hands present, upon elegant ebony and ivory. It called Lincoln in, like a gentle siren, a soft and tender thing, it showed no violence, it was as peaceful as sleep. It was Bach. Air.

Through more chambers and doors and locks and paths, through courtyards and balustrades and enclaves and such – and Lincoln was finally in the same room as the piano being played. For a time being, a fleeting moment as they all are, all he cared for was the music. He felt it in his bones. If this was where his life, his journey, was to end, “So be it.”

His handcuffs were unshackled and the grips around his arms disappeared. Those who had lead him here left through a door behind him, he would never see their faces. Over the heavenly keys, Lincoln heard an old voice speak, a voice that sounded older than all the forests of the world, “Let there be light. Remove your dark veil, young man.”

And slowly Lincoln did.

He found himself standing in a wide candlelit room, big enough to explain the echoes of the pure-white grand piano which dominated the centre of it. Seated at the keys, making humanity's pain worthwhile with his keystrokes, was the Master.

Although he was mostly in faint darkness, Lincoln could make out his harrowing look. He was old. Very old. Gaunt, like the skeletons from Lincoln's nightmare. Wispy white hair and a long face. He might have been handsome eighty years before this encounter. The coat he was wearing was purple with white pinstripes, a distinguished costume from the 19th century. There was a vivacious sash around his neck, fragrantly colored and worn like some kind of a delirious aristocrat. Every other small detail about the Master's style was either black or silver.

However, he seemed small and frail. Lincoln felt none of these wretched feelings the billionaire had described by simply being in his presence. About to dismiss the billionaire's warning words, he suddenly became all too aware aware of the defining feature of the Master, the feature that would replace his nightmare of burnt children:

He saw the Master's eyes.

Grey, like his skin – they told no story, they held no love nor hate nor pain. They were dead eyes, dead to the world. They were shallow, like low tide, made of stone, with no depth, no room for anything to rest behind them, no sanctuary would be found, they could offer no comfort. If he wasn't using them to bore into Lincoln's soul, Lincoln would've assumed they weren't real, made of antimony perhaps. Yet they moved like eyes, albeit with that same unpredictable thought behind them of some ancient creature still alive.

They did make Lincoln feel sick.

The Master stopped playing his music. The silence which filled the room was horrible. He gestured with his emaciated hand to a small wooden chair at the opposite end of the piano. Lincoln slowly walked over to it, towards the Master, unable to look him in the eye and so taking in the finer details of his surroundings as he went. There was one large window in the room, but it was pitch black outside, and only the candles and white piano appeared in its reflective depth. The carpet on the floor was a rich red, it looked like blood in the candlelight, dyed such a color with all the letting of genocides in history. The walls were marble with gold and varnished wooden frames hosting oil paintings of dramatic scenes, each one a masterful capturing of a pivotal moment in the story of mankind. All the sweetened colors of the room, in the flickering light, added to Lincoln's nausea as he sat in the chair. He looked down at his worn out shoes before looking across the piano's pristine white surface and into the Master's glare.

“What kind of conversation are we going to have?” the Master asked after some long seconds. It was obvious that Lincoln wasn't sure how to reply, so the Master continued, “You think you've come into **my** dungeon to tell **me** that your life matters, yet other than sit there and state this opinion – a somewhat unfulfilling venture – what do you really want to know?”

“Who are you?”

“**I**m as you are. **I** breathe. **I**ll die. **I** was made of the same cosmic drift and will return to the same earthly grave that **I** grew out of.”

“No, I mean—”

“You want words that will explain **me** as an individual?” the Master interrupted. His words had an intangible step to them that his body had surely long lost ago.

“Yes”, Lincoln replied.

“Fourteenth century merchants became sixteenth century traders. Their children became rich from ships and spices and slaves and faraway treasures kept from a writer’s mind. Their fortunes survived the French Revolution, for they came to this land and became masters of industry, wielders of man’s destiny. They were smart too, they learnt from the failings of Europe’s aristocracy and traded such trappings for secrecy. They orchestrated wars and the finances to execute either side of them, meanwhile they hid in the shadowy gardens of Berghof, Kremlin, Downing Street, and White House, whispering plays. **I**m Rockefeller with a mask, Rothschild with class, Du Pont’s desire... Now, that could all be true. It sounds plausible, does it not? Or it could be a lie. A grand lie. Like democracy or civilization. Maybe **I**m really the Devil in human form, in which case **I** need not to explain **my** origin. But, Lincoln, how will you ever know?”

“What is your name?”

“What is any name?”

“You won’t tell me?”

“**I** could tell you, but *it* won’t tell you anything. Just like your name. It tells me nothing about you, other than your parents’ sweet but foolish adulation for America’s sixteenth mascot.”

“You don’t like Abraham Lincoln?”

“Oh, we all like Abraham Lincoln”, the Master said. He then began playing another heartbreaking piece of music with his fingers on white keys to underscore their conversation. Lincoln grew frustrated, he was losing this mind game, and despite being

well out of his depth, he wanted to at least try stay in the fight; flicker before being blown out.

“Why do you hide away?”

“Can the Pope walk through Rome unobstructed?” the Master replied “**I** can hide in plain sight if **I** want. **I** can walk the streets of this furnace-world unseen. **I** don’t need to rely on statistics and polls and manipulated numbers to understand **my** herd. **My farm animals**. **I** can stand at the trough and watch them eat themselves and hear them bitch. But **I** don’t visit the trough anymore. People’s love for ‘fashions’ and ‘gossip’... It sickens **me**.”

“There are good people in the world”, Lincoln said.

The Master’s lips cracked a thin, mocking smile, “Of course there are. But they’re victim to the same idea as you; that any of this matters.”

“Life?”

“Humanity cannot clean up the mess it has gotten itself into, nature will be left with this task when we are performing none no more. To ease temporary suffering may be noble, Lincoln, but it is pointless.”

“I disagree. Anything to help has value.”

“**I** could kill Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping, and Barack Obama. **I** could kill them tonight, even. **I** could end the Kim dynasty in North Korea. **I** could end the EU. Let alone this Islamic State. **I** could do all these ‘valuable’ things to help whomever I see fit, but **I** don’t. Do you know why?”

“You’re lazy”, Lincoln said, not as a question but as a statement, making the Master smile properly, revealing his crooked teeth, old and sharp as they were.

“Although **I** could very well be the Devil, **I**’m most definitely not God. Nor do **I** want to be. If **I** balance one equation to make peace here, **I** imbalance it over there and a war begins. It is best if the masses do their own balancing, their own slaughtering.

Physics made the waterways that fostered civilizations, physics can and will manage them.”

“But you could save lives, millions.”

“How? By killing a tyrant? A tyrant in one eye is a revolutionary in another. Revolutions start with blood that congeals into ink that sours back into blood once more. Vacuums for insidious monsters emerge. And then **I’d** have to remove them as well. And it goes on. And on, forever. Humans are a despicable breed of animal. There is an endless supply of power-hungry people out there. More so, perhaps, than people who suffer from actual hunger, of which there are millions.”

“Someone good might rise up and surprise you.”

“A messiah! You’re not alone in awaiting one of them.”

“I don’t mean Jesus.”

“No, but what you speak of is Jesus, in some form; a savior... In fact, you two are quite alike.”

“Excuse me?”

“You live for some years, you wander the sands of Arabia, and around the same age you begin some spiritual quest. Not to mention; you both fall in love with prostitutes.”

“Mary Magdalene?”

“What a heart she must’ve had to steal that of God’s, no? Perhaps you are the Last Good Emperor the West”, the Master said with a wink, like an ogre smiling at a child.

“Why do you do any of this this?” Lincoln asked.

“**I** will answer your question, Lincoln, **I** will, **I** promise. But first; you must answer **mine**.”

“What is that?”

“Why did you become a soldier?” the Master asked.

“I was young, impressionable. I didn’t understand politics but I believed in things. I saw the Twin Towers come down in New York. As stupid as it seems now, I thought it was the right thing to do, to fight back”, he replied.

“Ah, yes. Nine-eleven. The great clock chime to announce the arrival of the third millennium, Anno Domini. **I**m not surprised nine-eleven wrenched out your inner killer. It was a dramatic event indeed. *Spectacular*. Great symbols of the twenty first century’s global society were used – turned against the very civilization that invented them. You have the jet plane – capable of shrinking the world to within a few hours of travel – being used like a sword to stab the heart of the most striking symbol of international trade and the West’s domination of it – the World Trade Center – and all of it was broadcast around the globe by the opium of modern Western culture – mass media. Now, did Osama bin Laden and his gang of Saudis know of the potency of the symbolism of their actions? Perhaps we’ll never know. They would say the power and poetry of their terror was the work of Allah. You could argue that it wasn’t even mere terrorism, but rather an artful act of regicide, an onomatopoeic act – a literal collision of the Christian and Islamic worlds, not seen perhaps since the fall of Constantinople in fourteen fifty-three. The embers of that old, frightening monotheistic flame were rekindled so that the fire may rage for another thousand years. Ah, yes. Nine-eleven; a grand piece of existential violence, for at its ultimate core lies the fundamental human question – why are we here?”

The Master then paused curiously for a moment, giving his aging mind a break.

“How was it regicide?” Lincoln asked.

“How was it not? They struck the King in front of the whole court, in New York City, high in the sky, where the whole world could see.”

“The King?”

“The West. The West and its powered and monetary monarchies.”

“Monarchies?”

“The First World War may have dismantled many social crowns in the West, but it created more dangerous ones. Industrial ones. Crowns of iron and steam instead of gold. New rulers for a new age. It was their war being fought, not that of King George or the Kaiser. Historians blame alliances between various nations, tensions in unruly sectors of the Balkans, but really the blame lies on the heads of the industrialists. The ‘Mediaman’ created nationalist fervor and the ‘Ironman’ created weapons to defend those feelings. They both excited things to insane levels until *bang* – some Serbian blows the whistle and the game begins. You see, that war was fought purely so the workers, who were starting to demand rights, could kill each other off in the millions and stunt their own progress. The ‘Masters of the Universe’, as they called themselves – the railway men, the newspaper men, armaments men, bankers, raw material gods – they couldn’t kill a fraction of the number and get away with it if they tried. So, they got the idiot class to devour itself. It’s quite beautiful, really. These are the monarchies which survived, *thrived*, in that war. These are the monarchies which still own you; the industrial feudalists. **I** should know, for **I** own them.”

“Answer my question; why do you do this?”

“Power coalesces to rule the world, Lincoln, just as matter did to create it. Someone inevitably has to do this job and it was given to **me** by **my** father. **I** will give it to **my** son. It’s not conspiracy theory that men like **me** exist – it’s systems theory, which is as much as a science as biology or chemistry.”

“But *why?* *Why* do you want to do it? You said you don’t want to play God, yet here you are – playing God!” Lincoln said angrily, getting to his feet, forgetting how weak his legs felt in the Master’s presence.

“**I’m** not playing God, **I’m** playing piano”, the Master said calmly, sitting Lincoln back down with chords centuries old. Lincoln found his hands shaking, with rage and fear in equal amounts.

“Stop playing fucking music!” he said woefully.

“You’re so frustrated, Lincoln”, the Master said, keeping the music alive, “Why?”

“Because your answer isn’t good enough! You’re not powerful at all! You can’t be the one I was looking for! I could kill you with my bare hands if I wanted. You’re nothing but an old man!”

Just then, through the one dark window in the room, ten or more red laser beams shone right at Lincoln’s chest and head. The Master simply looked at him with his archaic eyes and played his piano.

“I’ve had many guns pointed at me in the past. You don’t scare me. My point is that whoever is pointing those guns at me – they could easily point them at you”, Lincoln said.

“Who are you looking for, Lincoln?”

Lincoln paused as he stared at the red dots on his chest. They vanished just as his next thought arrived, “I’m looking for the most powerful person in the world. The one who has had more influence on my life than any other. I want to tell them that I mean something, even if they think I don’t. And the road can’t lead to a boring villain like you!”

“Why not? The world is not as complex a place as it seems. Planes brought down those buildings, not a man in some room in Manhattan with his finger on a button”, the Master said. Once again he stopped playing, sucking the life out of the room, as though it were a living, breathing animal. Breathing Bach.

“Perhaps”, the Master started, “Perhaps you are just falling victim to our oldest art? Storytelling. Ever since we could interpret each other’s grunts in the Great Rift Valley of Africa, stories have become our guilty pleasure. They’re interesting. They help us experience things we wouldn’t otherwise have. They help us fill in the blanks of the reality around us. You just can’t help but scratch that itch – the itch of curiosity that has survived millions of years, becoming more and more sophisticated as time goes by until, say, you reach the works of Homer. Maybe that is why you succumb to the notion of an

‘all powerful’ person? Maybe it satisfies you on a deeply ancient level? We all love a good story. Heroes, villains, struggles, victims – justice. Like conspiracy theorists, those who propose a more sinister account of things. You’re unhappy with the story because you feel there is a more compelling one to be told – and its truth is thus measured in the unit of intrigue; the story of the author is often more interesting than their work. You also think your life matters, and what better way to have this value proven than by living to see this ‘all powerful’ man? The great story of your life is magnified by the great story of something else.”

Lincoln’s head was a-twirl, a psychotic jamboree of meanings and symbols and histories and words – and pain.

“You understand man’s greatest intellectual feats – but you do not understand man himself”, he said to the Master. This, for whatever reason unknown to Lincoln, seemed to strike a chord within the Master – unfound on any instrument of music.

“What makes you think that **I** don’t understand you? **I** propose that **I** know you better than even yourself.”

“Because you don’t realize that you leave me with nowhere else to go. You don’t realize that all I have left is to die, so I may as well try my chance to kill you – like the cavemen we still are.”

“This isn’t true, Lincoln”, the Master said in that bone chilling calm that made people ill, “You haven’t offered **me** the question you have offered all those who led you to **me**.”

“What do you mean?” Lincoln asked.

“You haven’t asked **me** to introduce you to anyone. Honestly, **I** don’t know whether to be offended or flattered”, the Master said. Stumped, Lincoln took a moment to think, staring at the blood-red carpet at his feet.

“The road doesn’t end with you?” he asked.

“No! There is another.”

“You’re not the most powerful person in the world?” Lincoln asked with a naivety that made the Master laugh. His laugh sounded like chains clanging.

“There is indeed someone who has influenced your life more than anyone else on the face of this godforsaken planet.”

Trepidation replaced Lincoln’s desperation. “That itch”, he thought to himself.

“Who?” he finally asked, speechless if not for his nervous question.

“As you did not grant **me my** question, **I** will not grant you yours, that being; ‘would you like to meet them?’” the Master said, ignoring Lincoln’s inquiry, “Rather, **I’ve** already decided that you will indeed be put before them. **I** shall make this introduction, but not for your sake. Instead, it will be for the sake of proving to you, and **myself**, that **I** do understand you. **I** do understand **my** horde of man.”

At this, the Master stood up from behind his grand piano, revealing how frail his frame really was. His purple coat with its white pinstripes had tails that went down to the backs of his knees. He wore red pants with shiny black shoes. His dead grey eyes darted to Lincoln as he walked past him. The simple look made Lincoln gasp.

“Like before, you mustn’t know when or where you’ll be going. But don’t worry, dear boy, everything will be arranged”, the Master said, “Now, however, it is late and even the Devil needs his rest. Stay here, someone will come for you soon.”

It could’ve been seen as an act of reassurance, but the utter coldness of the Master’s hand made his pat on Lincoln’s face feel more like the lick of some dead tongue, still wet. The Master left the room, leaving Lincoln alone with the silent white piano.

Chapter Nine
T H E M O N S T E R

Black as before.

“Black as soon will be once more”, Lincoln thought ominously. He was blindfolded again, but this time there was no helicopter. The vessel in which he was to delve further down the corridor of power was a jet, presumably the Master’s own.

He had been given a windowless room to sleep in the night before, locked from the outside. It was, he imagined, the most luxurious and secure prison cell in the world. After a few hours of deep sleep – which were very much needed – just as dawn would’ve been showing herself, Lincoln was woken by a knock at the door. A handwritten note had been slipped underneath the door. The cursive harked back to the time of colonialism:

The suit is for you. Knock when your eyes are hid.

Lincoln saw the suit hanging from the Victorian clothes rack by the bed. It was the finest piece of clothing he had ever seen; black, so shiny it faded from deep blue to nearly white. A shirt the shade of pure snow hung there too. Adorning the tie, obsidian silk, Lincoln was a new man. He wore the same despondent dread, however. Standing by the door, he blinded himself with the sash provided and knocked gently on the door.

Having been maneuvered onto the plane, he felt the sun against his skin. It wasn't as warm as it was in New York. He wondered if he'd ever see the Empire State Building again.

The jet had taken off, that unnatural feeling of flight swept him up. Cuffed about the wrists as before, it was an hour or so in the air before he felt someone sit nearby.

"Did you sleep well?" the unmistakable voice of the Master asked.

"Yes."

"Good. I cannot say the same. Old age is not kind."

"Can you tell me anything about who I'm going to meet?" Lincoln asked, his voice with turbulence to match the jet's. There was a long pause before a response came.

"You'll see. Until then, I wanted to get to know you a little better. Tell me, what drives a man to seek such things like what you have in these last few days?"

"Nothing to lose."

"Is that really it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what about your life?"

"It was lost a long time ago. Then I lost my soul trying to find it."

"Do all war veterans speak like dying poets?"

Lincoln thought how best to answer this and turned his shielded face to where the Master's voice was coming from.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen", Lincoln began in a sort of mock performance, cupping his chained hands out in front of him, "I am very sorry, I do not wish to disturb any you on your subway ride to work, I know this is annoying for you and I don't want you to feel guilt about things out of your control, but I am a homeless veteran with no food or money. I served our great country. Anything you can give now me would be much appreciated."

"How many times a day would you do that?" the Master asked.

“I never did. But that’s how some ‘dying poets’ put it.”

The jet’s engines hummed along for some time before the Master said, “You might just be ready to meet this person, after all.” Lincoln felt the Master’s presence leave, it was the same sensation he felt when waking from a series of nightmares within nightmares, never sure if he truly had woken until the crystal moment of absolute reality hit him.

The plane ride continued. For hours Lincoln sat and waited, doing his best to drive away all his thoughts about everything; all the people, all the things, the suffering, his own and theirs – he ignored it all. He wished he was dead, but he ignored this wish too. He fell in and out of sleep several times, the drone of the plane dangling him in and out of empty dream-times of pure black.

Several hours passed, half a day perhaps, Lincoln couldn’t tell, but the plane soon landed at wherever it did. He waited to once again be shunted around before being placed in front of who, or whatever, he was meeting.

He took little notice of the pulling at his arms or the leading here and there. His feet did all the thinking required of him. He simply no longer cared what happened to him, if such a level of apathy were possible. One line, however, repeated over and over in his head, “Let’s just finish what you’ve started.”

The journey from the airstrip to the final destination, another room somewhere, consisted of being put in some vehicle and driven for an hour or so. All Lincoln took in of the last stretch of this journey was the occasional moment when he could feel the sun on his skin.

“The sun – the everlasting light – such a feeling it is to be in its glow. When I die, please just let it be in the sunlight”, Lincoln found himself thinking.

Seated again by the Master’s men, as if on trial before all of humankind, Lincoln was afraid of what he was about to see. True fear. White-hot fear, so blinding it stings.

“Lincoln, you’re seated in a room in the fair west city of San Francisco”, the gravelly voice of the Master said, “In this room stands **I** and the one who marks the end of your journey. Upon **my** request, they’ve agreed to meet with you. This is the one who has had more control over you than even **I** could ever dream of. The path your life has taken may have been dictated by **my** playing chess with the nations of the world, but this individual *owns* your life in ways you’ve probably never even considered. **I** hope **my** rather vulgar, melodramatic taste for theatrics has not been lost on you... See them now with your own eyes, as **I** see them with **mine**.”

With his right hand, Lincoln slowly pulled the black veil down from his face. Opening his eyes, he couldn’t believe who was sitting across from him. His heart almost stopped. What an irony it would’ve been for his heart to give out and fail him now; to come this far, only to collapse at the gate.

An imp would inscribe on the archway of this gate the mocking words:

If I just found the right words and put them in the right order, I’d get my ex-wife back

“Olivia...” Lincoln said in disbelief.

His ex-wife looked a little different to how he remembered her. Her hair was shorter and she had dyed it to be a darker, more sombre shade of brown. It used to be the exact same smooth color as her light almond eyes, and this combination of matching eyes and hair once gave her the most inviting sense of comfort that was hers alone to offer. But now there was a fear in those eyes, with tears and hostility, those eyes that had once shown so much pity and promised so much love. Her fashion seemed different too, more mature, but as if others had forced her to become an adult rather than herself by the nature of her own aging and weariness. Her face, however, was the same. It still framed that aching beauty she had held close her whole life. It was a defined softness that matched the gentle sway in which she moved and thought about the world. It had been

four years since Lincoln had seen it. Olivia was as unmistakable now as she ever was. The most breathtaking thing about her though was, of course, the least superficial of her features. It was her tendency for warmth. For kindness. For mercy.

She had a check clasped in her hands. They were trembling, as Lincoln's were, as too did her voice when she spoke.

"Lincoln, who is this man?" she asked, glancing quickly to the Master who stood nearby, dressed now in a more demure sense of class than the night before, watching with his eyes of grey-nothing.

"I honestly don't know", Lincoln replied, wishing he had some way of explaining to her how absurd the Master's character was.

"He offered me one million dollars to meet with you. You must have some idea", she said, waving a cheque in her hand. Lincoln struggled to process everything that was happening, that had happened – that was going to happen.

"Well, I mean, I just met him, but I have no idea why he's brought me to you", Lincoln said truthfully.

"Really?" Olivia asked, not believing a single word, her lip quivering, "Why won't you simply leave me alone?"

"Olivia! You have to believe me – I had no idea this was happening! I thought he was bringing me to meet some kind of... some phantom or force of nature or an old supernatural prince of fate or some shit. I didn't know what he was doing!"

Olivia looked with pity and sadness at the state of her ex-husband, the man, the soul she once loved so dearly.

"You're insane", she said coldly. They were in the living room of her new home, a quintessential San Franciscan abode on Russian Hill. The walls were a gentle color and the furnishings were even softer. Sunlight flooded in through the windows, making everything warm and aglow. Beyond them was the peaceful view of the Californian city.

"You live here?" he asked her.

“Yes, I live here.”

“Alone?”

“No, not alone. I’m married. I have a family.”

When Lincoln was finally able to take this information in, it numbed Lincoln. The grief arrived quickly and made it known that it would never leave. He felt his bones turning slowly into dust. It was as if he were now just a ghost with the sole purpose of haunting this beautiful woman, as if this was the only reason he had remained after some death; to long. Every lovely moment of their life together, every glimpse of simple happiness, every dance, every laugh, every flash of mute affection, they all flickered like a tortured projection in his memory. They were sepia memories now, gone forever. They made his jaw heavy, his eyes wet, and his soul a cold shade of the deepest blue. There had always been a hope, however small, that there could be new memories made one day, but now there was just left the many sentimental agonies of a broken fool. The amount of feeling was overwhelming. His breath became a shadow. Lincoln thought about how young he and Olivia had been when they first met. How full of life they both were. There was nothing he could do to make this moment any less painful. He mourned her.

Then, as his heartache tightened underneath his hollow chest, like a knot beneath broken ribs, he noticed all the photo frames in the room had been turned facedown. Olivia was keeping even the pictures of her family free of Lincoln’s sight.

Finding no refuge in Olivia’s wept-stare, Lincoln turned to the only other person in the room – the Master. He gave the Master an honest look of the purest and most pathetic sorrow. He didn’t care anymore about the mind games. He just needed a friend. It was, of course, a brilliant mistake, for the Master simply returned Lincoln’s look of abject pain with a vengeful scold and chose this moment to twist cruel words deep into his ruined soul, to prove why he was reviled and revered.

“Don’t ever underestimate the Devil again. Nor tempt him, that is his job. You’re a court jester, Lincoln. A clown. Nothing but a fool, dancing to a pauper’s tune on the whim of **my** kings”, he taunted.

It was the Master’s thin crack of a smile that then made Lincoln cold with horror. The Master’s unanswerable hint could drive Lincoln mad...

“Wait!” the thoughts came crashing down, “Is the Master really some twenty-first century aristocrat masquerading as the Devil, or is he really just a friend of the billionaire’s, a willing actor in a cruel practical joke? Am I more of a fool than I ever realized?”

With his humiliation of Lincoln just beginning, the Master then shot Olivia a final glimpse with his alabaster eyes, making her shiver. He then turned on the heel of his black snakeskin shoes and walked away, disappearing momentarily in the brightness of the sun. Lincoln and Olivia watched in silence as he walked slowly along the garden path and through the flowered gate of her modest property. A man in a suit held the door to a black SUV open for him. The Master, the animal that could eat all the others, got into the back seat. The door was shut. The SUV pulled away from the sidewalk and the Master was gone, forever.

After a while, Olivia and Lincoln brought their thoughts back into the room in which they sat.

“I changed my email, my phone number, I moved cities, everything online got new names, I even changed what clothes I wear so you couldn’t recognize me. Why do you still hunt me?” she asked, breaking into tears with the utter desperation of it all.

“I swear, I wasn’t looking for you, Liv”, Lincoln said.

“Yeah? Just like you swore you’d never hit me again?”

“I’m sorry”, Lincoln said.

“Sorry? Okay...”

“No, I mean it. I really am. You have no idea how much I regret ruining our family.”

“We never had a family!”

“We did once... in the future, remember? We were going to have a family.”

Wiping her eyes, determined to face down her demon with dignity and strength, Olivia looked to Lincoln and said, “You brought the madness of the Middle East into our home, into my head. You gave me black eyes! You broke my nose!”

Neither spoke for a while after this.

“If I could undo—”

“You can’t undo it! You can only leave me alone. But even then, you get some wealthy man to bribe me back into your world of bullshit insanity.”

“That wasn’t a wealthy man, that was *the* wealthy man.”

“What?”

“He’s some sort of... fuck, I don’t know. You wouldn’t believe me even if I could explain it”, Lincoln said, dropping his head into his hands.

“Where do you live now? I only ask so I know never to go there”, Olivia said.

“New York.”

His answer made her gasp in grief, “Why do you do it to yourself?”

“Remember our holiday to New York?” Lincoln answered, “Remember how we crossed the Brooklyn Bridge? We ate two dollar pizzas and we watched the street music. We walked the streets and saw every kind of person imaginable. Remember how happy we were there? We still exist there. We’re still happy there together. In some place in the past, it’s still warm for us there. Soft music, street blues and saxophones. The trees of Central Park still give us shade. The subway makes us sweat. That’s where I live. It’s where I’ll always live, with you. Our life there, in that moment, those few weeks. I listen to that jazz piece every day, it makes me think of you. It takes me back in time and I can see you smiling at me.”

“Jesus Christ”, Olivia said, shaking her head, “You’re sick, Lincoln. You’re sick and you need help.”

“But you won’t help me?”

“How could you ask me to after all that’s happened? How could you? The Lincoln I knew never came back from that third tour. He got lost in the sand of fucking Iraq. What came back was an animal. It was a mistake for me to try keep loving you after you beat me down like I was a dog.”

“It was one moment of anger! One! I had seen kids blow themselves up for fuck sake! I said I was sorry! I still am sorry! I’ll always be sorry... I still love you, Liv... our life together, I miss it...” he pleaded. The thought of him still loving her made Olivia want to be sick.

“I left you because I suddenly remembered it was my life, not *ours*. I care more about waves crashing on rocks in unnoticed parts of the ocean than I do about you. You’re not Lincoln, you’re a monster”, Olivia said with venom behind her teeth.

Now was the time for Lincoln to finally deliver his almighty “I matter” line, but as this moment offered itself, he found himself changing it to something even more honest, “I’m sorry.”

Olivia rolled her eyes at his apology and then ripped up the Master’s check. She stood up, crumpled the paper into a ball, and tossed it onto Lincoln’s lap.

“I’ve had my stupid conversation with you, now get the hell out of my life.”

For a minute, maybe two, maybe forever, Lincoln remained seated. He kept his head low. His whole journey had come to this. Here he finally was, in front of Olivia, but there was nothing he could say. He couldn’t find the words, though he had found her, for he knew that to try sway her would only serve to cause her more pain. A blackened heart instead of blackened eyes. It would just be more abuse. He didn’t realize, until it was too late, that she had turned her back on him and that he would never see her pale fawn eyes ever again. He rose to his feet when he finally conceded that there were no words to get her back, there were no words to speak that could return the look of love to her gaze.

“Words, words, words”, Shakespeare’s Hamlet screamed inside Lincoln’s head.

Walking slowly to the front door, Lincoln paused and said one more pathetic word to Olivia, “Sorry.”

She offered him nothing in return. She had nothing left to give. He soaked in his last glimpse of her and walked out of her home and her life, as she had demanded, hoping only that in one far off day in time, she may find somehow to forgive him. Other than reaching this hope, to which he clung within, his journey had led him nowhere.

He was the pawn that had made it all the way to the end of the board, only for his queen to refuse to come back. On the slanted streets of Saint Francis’ city, Lincoln strolled just as aimlessly as he had done in New York.

“Where to now, court jester?” he asked himself.

Along the rainbow-flagged Market Street of this Mecca for the down and out, Lincoln found an answer to his just-asked question. There was a junkie lying in an alcove of some disused building with a needle still hanging from his vein. The heroin had kicked in the high before the junkie had time to remove the spike.

“I’ll just overdose, here and now”, Lincoln decided.

With this goal in mind, he continued down Market Street, coming to an intersection at 9th Street where the homeless hive buzzed. Such human decay in all directions.

Businessmen – which Lincoln realized he must look like, dressed in his suit – the middle class, the lower class, they all stepped over the humans lying on the sidewalk. From his experience, Lincoln knew these people doing the stepping over had probably tried to help those on the ground in the past. However, the tide cannot be stopped by rocks, eventually the water smoothens them and flows over them, just as these people stepped over their fellow man.

“Junk won’t be too hard to find”, Lincoln thought, as he scanned the misery of San Francisco’s darkest blocks. Indeed, as he walked, he saw a rambling man standing by a shutdown porno theatre who offered him a death-invite. It was hard to hear what he was saying, it so incoherent, but listening closer as he passed, Lincoln caught a few words.

“I dunno man, it's all so big, and people everywhere, million of meals, million of meals, do we even have enough cows? How do we even feed them all? How do we feed all the cows too? And then you got and then you got global warming and the and the the politics! And the stars and celebrities in the sky. Oh man, where do we start, where do we end? What's on television tonight? You wanna buy some dope, man?”

Lincoln stopped and looked to him, “You selling, man?”

“Oh man, oh man, we all selling, we all selling our souls, you know? You know? Yeah, I'm selling, man. What you want?”

“H.”

“I get you some H, man. You just stay here. I'll be back in a few minutes. Figuring out all the things. The bailouts! Billion of dollars. Hundred of billion of dollars! Greatest heist of all time...”

Lincoln watched as the rambler wandered off down the sidewalk and around the corner of 10th Street, mumbling nothings as he went. Overwhelmed with his life that was about to end, Lincoln sat down on the cleanest part of the sidewalk that he could find. To his annoyance, a homeless woman pushing a supermarket trolley with all her belongings came by and stared at him.

“I found a fishing pole down there, you want it? I'll give it to you for three bucks”, she said. Lincoln shook his head, “No, thanks.”

She didn't move on, she just stared at Lincoln. She ruffled through her trolley of garbage and reached for a piece of cardboard. Extending it out to him, she said, “Here, you better take this then.”

Before Lincoln had a chance to say he didn't want it, she was off trying to sell her fishing pole to someone else. At first glance, it was just another piece of cardboard, but there was something written on it. In black marker was scrawled:

RANKINGS
of the GAME of LIFE

2	<i>the Insane</i>
3	<i>the Poor</i>
4	<i>the Educated</i>
5	<i>the Optimistic</i>
6	<i>the Apathetic</i>
7	<i>the Ignorant</i>
8	<i>the Police</i>
9	<i>the Government</i>
10	<i>the Media</i>
Jack	<i>the Rich</i>
Queen	<i>the Military</i>
King	<i>the Banks</i>
Ace	<i>'They'</i>
Joker	<i>You</i>

Lincoln read it over a few times before he really understood what he was reading. Then it struck him, like a lightning bolt. For someone who didn't believe in God or fate or destiny or any of that stuff, Lincoln found that he being given this piece of cardboard by this woman, who may or may not have even known it had something written on it, was an undeniable act of intervention on behalf of the Universe.

Some person who he'd never meet, doped up, drunk, who knows, had given Lincoln the thing he'd been looking for all this time; a realization. A realization that *he* was the most powerful person in the world. His journey hadn't led him nowhere – for at the end of corridor of power is a mirror for you to stare at your empowered self in. What he had been maneuvering and conning to find all this time was himself.

His memory cast him back to Edie's room in that Greenpoint brothel.

~ ~ ~

Humiliated, he ignored her cynicism before repeating, “Who is the most powerful person you know?”

Edie tried to hide her smirk. She didn't know how to break this awkwardness other than by reverting to her trade, so placed a seductive hand tenderly on his thigh. She gazed at him with her deep pool eyes, and in luxurious tones to melt all men of their resolve, she said, “You are.”

~ ~ ~

She was right all along, but neither of them had known it. Not like he knew it now. It was so painfully obvious: every individual in this world has the potential within them to be ‘the most powerful’. If only he had seen this scrap of cardboard sooner...

“Fuck suicide”, he thought, “Go find Edie.”

Chapter Ten

C H E C K

Court Square, two days earlier...

Eddie walked through the bustle of Court Square as Lincoln took her seat. She had just waited for him to get his money to 'buy her freedom'. Her handbag was heavy with the weight of the cash.

Hugging it tight to her body, she walked out of the station and into the Queens heat. Her pimp, Giovanni 'The Bear' Vettoretti, spent his time lounging around in his home not far from the station. He sat there, getting drunk and stoned, and plotted; plotted who to fuck over next, plotted how to cheat more of this world for himself, plotted how to be a bigger piece of shit than he already was.

With her head low, she walked along the sidewalk and ran her plan through her head again, "Take this guy's money, pay the debt, don't return to Court Square. Don't return to help this lunatic. Make for California, then drift over the ocean, that endless blue that remembers nothing."

She had been sly, however. Years on the streets had taught her how to be, how she needed to be. When Lincoln had asked her how much money she owed, she'd said twenty thousand. She only owed ten, but she overstated the amount just in case he said he'd help her out – which he had. The other ten thousand was going to help start her new life somewhere.

Passing by a group of street artists who cat-called her, she kept her head down and held her handbag tight. In a matter of minutes, she was standing outside the Bear's 44th Road apartment. Heart pounding, she climbed the few steps up to the front door and pressed the buzzer.

"Who izzit?" some droll wiseguy asked.

"Edie", she said.

"Oh, honey, c'mon up, baby", the wiseguy said. The front door unlocked with a click and she stepped inside. She used the elevator to take her to the top floor. When the doors opened, she saw the wiseguy waiting for her with the door open. He was a large black guy, leather jacket sleaze with a joint smouldering in his hand.

"Sure is good to see you, sugar", he said with an awful grin.

"Is Gio in?" she asked.

"Maybe, you gimme a kiss and we'll see", he said, shifting his weight to his other foot with that predatory swagger that made her feel worthless. She walked up to him and went to give him a peck on his cheek when he grabbed her tight and stuck his tongue in her mouth. She clutched her handbag tight and endured the humiliation.

"Yeah, Gio's in", he said with a satisfied smile. She brushed past him, trying ignore the foul taste of tar he left in her mouth. The inside of the Bear's apartment looked like that of a spoilt teenager. There were degrading posters of women hung about, awful music was blaring, the place was an absolute mess, beer cans and ashtrays littered throughout. Down the end of the dim main hallway was the living room. It's where Edie usually found Gio, lazing about with some poor coked-up street girl.

This time was no different.

Playing a football video game, there sat the foulest human Edie had ever known, more repugnant than any customer who she had to fuck. A young, scantily clad girl, maybe sixteen or so, clung onto his arm. Her eyes were blood-red, she barely even noticed as Edie walked into the room. The Bear himself had jeans, no shoes, no top, just

a disgusting hairy chest, a pot belly, and sagging muscles dyed in prison inks. He was clean shaven, from chin to cranium, looking more like a member of the Aryan Brotherhood than whatever scrap of the mafia he hailed from. No jewelry decorated his ugly face.

“Honey Cunt!” he called out to Edie as she walked in, pausing his game to face her, “What can I do for ya? You wanna hang out? Janie here might’ve burnt through most the blow, but for you, my princess, we can find more.”

Edie stood still, “No, I don’t want any.”

“Nothin’? Grass? A beer? You better not be shootin’ up again, it’s too fuckin’ dangerous, I can’t have any more of you whores dyin’ on me”, he said, pointing his yellow finger at her.

“No, I’m not. I came to pay you”, she said.

“Oh, good!” he said, sliding the young girl off of his arm like she were slime. She slipped back into the couch with a slight frown, lost in her mind. The Bear got to his feet and went over to a safe by the wall. As he unlocked it, Edie looked around and noticed how empty the usually busy apartment was. The curtains were pulled as usual though – the Bear didn’t like to be reminded that he was only king of this little room.

“Where is everyone?” she asked.

“Oh, the boys? They’re out doin’ a job”, he said, opening the safe full of cash and taking out a notebook. He walked over to her, held the notebook at his side and leaned in for a kiss. It was the same insufferable experience she had just had at the door.

“So, sweetheart, says here you still owe me ten g”, he said, flicking through the notebooks pages, “Ten thousand, two hundred to be exact.”

“Yeah”, she said. Her nerves were beginning to show – if anyone was watching.

“So, how much you got today?”

She gulped slightly, “All of it.”

The Bear was stumped for a moment, then he gave a smile which turned into a laugh, “C’mon, Honey Cunt, you get paid to suck dick, not make jokes. Don’t fuck me around. How much you really got for me?”

“All of it”, Edie repeated, carefully opening her handbag to make sure he wouldn’t see how much was really in there. She took out the chunks of money and put them on a table nearby, covered in white powder dust. The Bear looked at all the money on the table and then looked to her. He had a dangerous look of wild distrust in his eyes.

“What the fuck is this?” he asked.

“That’s all the money I owe you. I’m out”, Edie said, her voice cracking slightly.

“You’re out? You’re out?” the Bear asked rhetorically, grinding his teeth in agitation, “You’re out when I fuckin’ say you’re out! You hear me?”

The wiseguy came to stand in the doorway of the living room upon hearing his boss’ anger. Edie was trapped.

“But... but that’s all the money I owe you”, Edie tried to reason.

“Yeah? And tell me, *cunt*, where does a piece of shit whore like you suddenly get ten thousand fuckin’ dollars? Huh?”

“I earned it”, she said meekly.

“Last week you gave me two hundred. Two fuckin’ hundred! Now you rock up here with ten *thousand?*” he shouted, before suddenly switching to a chilling calm to state, “I don’t fuckin’ think so. There’s somethin’ you ain’t tellin’ me. I might have to employ niggers but don’t think that makes me some kinda fool.”

“What? I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve been saving up, working extra clients”, she said, now with shaking hands and knees. The Bear looked over to his wiseguy, neither of them brought her lie. The Bear tried to remain calm, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath before glaring back to Edie.

“You’ve been a good girl”, he said, “So I’m gonna give you one more chance to tell me the truth. Where did you get this money?”

“I... I told you where. I’ve been saving up and working extra—”

Before she could finish her desperate lie, the Bear had lunged at her, grabbing her around the neck with a vice-like hand, and pinning her to the wall. As she choked and panicked, she dropped her handbag. The girl on the couch offered a sick chuckle at Edie’s expense.

An actual bear would have had more rationality in its eyes than the Bear did as he held Edie to the wall. He looked down at the handbag and kicked it over to the wiseguy.

“See what else this bitch has in there”, the Bear said to him. Edie began to squirm behind the Bear’s rock-solid grip, both because it hurt and she was convinced she was done for. The wiseguy picked up the handbag and went through it, quickly discovering the other ten thousand. He placed it on the table next to the other pile of money and gave a telling look to his boss.

The Bear reacted as if Edie had broken his heart.

“You know, I gave you the junk you craved because you were a stupid bitch, and then when you couldn’t pay for it, I cut you deal and gave you a way out. I’m a fuckin’ gentleman to you and all you do is try fuck me like you fuck my clients? I never done anythin’ wrong by you, Honey Cunt. I always took care of your habit, took care of the assholes who roughed you up while you were under my employment, and this – *this!* – is how you choose to repay me? By findin’ some stack of money more valuable than you’ll ever be and keepin’ it from me? Well, fuck you!” and with that, he landed a solid punch right in Edie’s stomach.

She dropped to the floor with the wind knocked out of her. She was now more afraid than she had ever been in her entire life. She would’ve cried but didn’t want to give these men the satisfaction. Another giggle from the girl on the couch echoed her gasps for breath. She held herself tight, lying in the fetal position on the floor.

The Bear, trembling in anger, kneeled down to her.

“When you pull your tits into shape, get up and take a fuckin’ seat. We’re gonna talk about what happens next”, he said viciously into her ear. He then got up, looked to the girl on the couch and said to the wiseguy, “Take this one down the hall. Me and the girl whose parents gave her a whore’s name are gonna have a little talk.”

The wiseguy did as he was ordered, scooped up the girl and herded her out of the room. The Bear then sat down where he had been before. Edie whimpered on the floor for a few more seconds before dragging herself up and sitting opposite him. She was a broken woman. The Bear sighed and ran his hands over his shaved head, the stubble making a sandpaper sound on his fingers.

“Alright”, he said, taking a deep breath, getting over hurt feelings, “Alright. I don’t like hittin’ gals. I wish you hadn’t made me do that, I really do. But we’re adults, so let’s talk like adults now, okay? You forgive me? Forgive me for my little outburst?”

Eddie kept her eyes on the floor and offered a gentle nod.

“Good. Good, okay. Now then, tell me straight – where did all this cash come from? It didn’t fall outta the fuckin’ sky”, he said.

“A... a guy gave it to me”, Edie said, her gut in agony.

“You’re a good piece of ass, I give you that – no, a great piece of ass, actually – but why, in the holiest of almighty fucks, would someone give you twenty thousand dollars?”

“He’s a client”, Edie started, “A real weird guy. He’s come in a few times and, I don’t know, I think he likes me. We got talking and he asked me why I do what I do. I told him I was paying off debt. He seemed like he had a bit of money, so I figured I’d tell him I owed more than I did, just in case he offered to pay it off for me. The rest was gonna be for me to start a new life somewhere.”

“A new life? You? I told you, you don’t make the jokes, darlin’ – I do. I’m fuckin’ hilarious. But comedy aside, I’m guessing he did offer, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? So he could run away with you?”

Eddie chose her words carefully from here, not wanting to land Lincoln in danger, “Yeah, pretty much.”

“That’s the most outrageous bullshit I think I’ve ever heard!” the Bear said with glee.

“It’s true!” Eddie protested.

“Hey sugar, I never said it wasn’t true, I just said it was outrageous bullshit”, the Bear said. He then took a moment to think, plotting, yet again, how to ruin more lives.

“Where is this dumbass now?” he asked.

“The train station.”

“The train station? Oh, right, you must mean that singular fuckin’ train station in all of goddamn New York City... I told you not to fuck with me!”

“Court Square.”

“Court Square? Fuck me, Jesus, he’s just down the street... Goddamn, if the boys weren’t out we coulda grabbed this asshole this minute... Fuck! Alright... this is what we’re gonna do. You’re gonna make him think I accepted your payment, that our debt is off, and that you’re a free woman. But I want you keep him in New York. Then, after a few days of datin’ him, let’s say two or three days so he gets comfortable, you arrange to meet this nut-job somewhere for some lovey-dovey date and me and the boys will slam him, see how much more money he’s got. Then we’ll turf his ass in the East River. After that, and only after that, is our debt through and you can say you’re ‘out’. Sound like a plan, darlin’?”

“I think he’s a drifter, how am I supposed to keep him in New York?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know! Use your ass, it’s all you’re good for. Tell him you love him if you have to. Tell him you love him more than life itself. Just keep him in New York. Whatever it takes. But, baby, if you two aren’t at the corner of... Jesus, let’s say... Crescent and Thirty-Sixth at nine o’clock in three days time... you’ll be out for good. You understand what I’m sayin’?”

Eddie nodded, taking it in, death threat and all.

“You’re a good kid, I hate to fucking do this to you, but you can’t come into my home and try to do me over, you understand? This is what happens. What kind of man would I be if I let little sluts walk all over me? Huh? You’re lucky you ain’t dead already. You’re lucky I’m a goddamn genius that can come up with solutions instead!”

The sight of Edie sniffing, hunched over in her seat, made the Bear tired of her.

“Go on, get the fuck outta here already, you’re makin’ me sick”, he said, “But remember! Crescent and Thirty-Sixth, nine o’clock, three days time.”

“I’ll remember...” Edie said, painfully standing and leaving the Bear behind.

Back on the street, she found a quiet alcove to sob in. Not knowing how long she had been gone, she forced composure upon herself and made her way back to Lincoln at Court Square.

Greenpoint, the following day...

“Edie, I... I don’t understand, what are you saying?” Lincoln asked.

“How can you not understand? Stay with me!” Edie pleaded.

“You want to be with me?” he asked.

“Yes!” she lied desperately, only her sobs genuine.

“But... why?” he asked.

Not wanting to get Lincoln killed, Edie had decided not to try trick him into staying. However, as the moment for Lincoln to actually leave finally arrived, the reparations she feared the Bear would exact upon her terrified her into saying – “Because I... I think I love you.”

She looked to him with the saddest face she could put on.

“You love me?” he asked, causing a slight snigger from the judge. Lincoln turned to him with scolding eyes, “Turn around, face the wall and shut up, you sick fuck.”

Rolling his eyes, the judge turned to face the wall. Keeping a close eye on him, Lincoln walked over to Edie and sat down on the floor against the wall next to her, taking a hold of her hand.

“I think I love you too”, he finally said. Edie just sniffled in reply, her conscience aflame. She lessened her guilt by telling herself, “We can figure something out together.”

However, Lincoln then sighed and said, “But I have to do this.”

“But why? It’s so stupid and dangerous!” Edie said, bottom lip shaking as she finally spoke some truth.

“I have to do this, Edie”, Lincoln said.

“Please, Lincoln, please... please don’t. Please just stay with me.”

“Edie—”

“I’ll be so good to you. Please... please, please, please! Please stay.”

She saw Lincoln trying to think of a way to soften his hardened thoughts. Not wanting to give him the chance, she took control; she placed her hand softly on his cheek and looked slowly up at him... then she kissed him gently, letting their lips feel every little touch. She could feel his breath quicken, so chose her delicate moment to whisper, “Stay.”

For a second, she thought her spell had worked, but that second passed.

“I’m sorry”, he said softly, himself now choking with emotion.

“No, no...” Edie said, almost in a panic, her hands beginning to tremble, “No, please Lincoln! Stay. Just stay!”

“Goodbye, Edie”, Lincoln said before kissing her damp cheek. About to rip himself from her, Edie grabbed his arm, and they caught eyes again. There was so much genuine fear in her, but Lincoln thought it was heartache, nothing more.

“I love you”, she lied, “Won’t you love me too?”

“You deserve a better man than me”, Lincoln said. Edie collapsed in a distraught heap. Her eyes ran water of salt and sorrow. Painfully heaving himself upward, Lincoln walked over to the judge.

“Keep your back to Edie and get out of the room”, Lincoln said. Opening the door to the hallway, Lincoln checked the way was clear. The judge shuffled into the corridor of black carpet as he was ordered to.

Lincoln looked over to Edie before he left her room for the last time and said, “Thank-you, Edie... for everything.”

She didn’t look at him, she kept her head low and wept. Her soul had been crushed it would seem. Lincoln stepped into the hallway and shut the door, knowing he would likely never see her again.

Upon hearing the door close, Edie looked to the ceiling, doing her best to pool her tears in his bottom eyelids. She felt like screaming out loud, instead she did it in her head, “*Fuuuuuck!* Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

She started shaking, not knowing what to do with herself.

“Okay, just tell Gio” her head raced with regret, “Just say what you had planned to say; that you fucked up and the weirdo left.”

She had been so confident that she wasn’t going to change her mind, but in the heat of the moment, the idea of telling the Bear that Lincoln had left simply scared her too much.

“You goddamn coward! Just tell him Lincoln’s gone. He won’t kill you, he won’t. He needs you to keep working for him”, she tried to calm herself. Sitting on the floor, she mourned her life, afraid of the Bear.

After a few minutes of crying, she pulled herself off the floor, thinking, “Gio won’t kill you. Surely...”

Getting dressed, her middle still sore from the Bear's blow, she left her room and wandered down the hallway. Coming to the front room, she saw Lola sitting there, reading and listening to music as she did everyday.

"Eddie? What's up? You done already?" Lola asked.

"Yeah", Eddie said.

"Where's the fella?" Lola asked.

"Ah... he wanted to slip out the back", Eddie lied.

"Eddie! Why do you do it? You know Gio doesn't want guys using the back. Why do you piss him off like this?"

"Well, don't tell him!"

"Hey, c'mon, you know me, why would I tell a piece of shit like him anything?" Lola said, a look of concern growing on her face at Eddie's obvious state of distress.

"Yeah, I know", Eddie replied.

"You wanna sit down? Have a smoke?" Lola asked.

"No", Eddie said, shaking her head, "I'm done for the day. That guy makes me sick. I'm just gonna go home, try forget about him."

"Yeah, tell me about it, he's a pig", Lola said. Her concern for her friend was not over with though, making her add, "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I heard Gio laid into you pretty bad last night. Fucking asshole."

"Who told you that?"

"Ah, I forget her name... Angel or some shit. She's his new girl. Only fifteen years old, can you believe that? What kinda man beats up women and sleeps with little girls?"

"The kind of man we work for, I guess", Eddie said bluntly, making her way to the 'FUCK'ing door.

"Yeah, I guess", Lola said, shaking her head, "Hey, look after yourself, alright?"

"Yeah."

Eddie's apartment was a few blocks from the brothel. It was small and dingy with just meagre possessions about, but it was her sanctuary. If she tiptoed and leaned to one side at her bedroom window, she could just see the top of the Empire State Building.

She got home and quickly turned on the air-conditioner. It was so hot inside that without it on she'd have a splitting headache in a matter of seconds. Not that she didn't already have one on this particular evening already. Sitting on her dusty sofa, she broke down in tears again.

"You stupid bitch", she said to herself over and over, "You stupid bitch."

The truth was, that was the first time she had ever told anyone she 'loved' them. Not only was it a lie, but it was a poisoned one, designed to endanger a man who had only tried to help her.

Slowly, as her thoughts and fears and regrets began to subside just enough, she came to accept that there was just one thing left to do. She got out her cellphone and called the Bear.

"Honey Cunt!" he answered, "What's happenin', princess?"

Writhing, she braced herself and spoke honestly, "I fucked up. He's gone."

There was a deadly silence at the other end of the phone. Eventually, the Bear spoke, "Whaddya mean?"

"He's gone", she wept fearfully, "I tried my best to keep him with me. I told him I loved him and everything, but he wouldn't stay. I'm sorry, Gio, I'm really sorry."

"Well, where the fuck did he go?" the Bear asked angrily.

"I don't know."

"Has he skipped town?"

"I don't know where he's going or where he'll end up", Eddie said, crying into her phone. Again, deadly silence filled her ear.

"You stupid bitch", the Bear then said, echoing Eddie's own thoughts.

"What happens now?" she asked.

“Okay...” he sighed, pissed off, “Since you’ve been honest with me, you haven’t fucked me around, I’m gonna go easy on you. I won’t blow your fuckin’ head off, alright? So calm down. I mean, I should, but I won’t. After all, I’m a businessman, Honey Cunt, and that money you gave me, that doesn’t count – so you still owe me ten grand. You’re still workin’ for me, you understand? But the second that fucker shows his face again, you call me. I’ll tell all the gals to look out for him too. And stop fuckin’ cryin’! Some guys like that shit, I ain’t one of them, you sound pathetic. Pull your shit together and get back to work.”

With that, he hung up. Edie was overcome with relief that the Bear had allowed her to live, but devastated that she had missed her window for freedom. She cried alone in her dismal apartment.

LaGuardia Airport, the day after that...

Back from San Francisco, Lincoln stepped out of the airport terminal, back into the searing heat of New York’s June. He didn’t know where to find Edie, he didn’t know where she would be, but he knew the place to start looking.

That girl, Lola. That house of ill-fame.

Greenpoint.

Chapter Eleven
C H E C K M A T E

“Born and raised – the Bronx”, the cabbie said, “Where are you from, man?”

“Minneapolis”, Lincoln said, “Visited New York once and fell in love with it. Moved here about four years ago.”

“Aha, whereabouts?”

“East Village.”

“Oh, yeah. They tidied that part of city up pretty good, huh? Used to be bad, man. Nearly as bad as Harlem itself. Harlem ain’t too bad now, though, either. Still got its problems, you know, but the whole city’s getting better.”

Lincoln liked this cab driver, he seemed like a real person compared to the ones he’d met the last few days. Everything seemed brighter now that’d he’d climbed out of that dark depth of the world of power and influence.

“You some kinda businessman?” the cabbie then asked because of Lincoln’s suit.

“No, this suit was a gift. I was a soldier, now I just... I don’t know, drift around the city”, Lincoln said.

“A soldier? Hell, look at me, driving a hero about town.”

“I’m no hero, man.”

“You are to me, brother. You are to me.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you to say.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m only calling you a hero ‘cause I don’t wanna be driving no drifter around”, the cabbie joked. The two men shared a laugh. As they drove towards Greenpoint, Lincoln noticed the news report on the taxi’s radio: ISIS.

“You couldn’t change stations could you?” Lincoln asked.

“Oh shit, sure thing, man. What kind of music you like?”

“It’s your taxi, play whatever you want”, Lincoln answered. With the push of a button, ISIS dissolved through the static to some heavy East Coast rap.

“You don’t mind this?” the cabbie asked.

“Not at all”, Lincoln said. The prophetic poetry of some of New York’s strugglers carried them the rest of the way to Brooklyn. Pulling up down the street from the Greenpoint brothel, Lincoln gave the cabbie a generous tip.

“Shit, you really are a hero”, the cabbie joked when he saw the money, “Thank-you.”

“Take it easy”, Lincoln said with a smile as the yellow cab trailed off in search of another job. It left Lincoln standing on the streets of Greenpoint yet again. Back to where it all started.

Taking his time to soak in the sunshine, he slowly wandered down the road to the brothel. It loomed before him like a bad memory sometimes does in someone’s mind. Walking up the steps to the front door, he pressed the buzzer as he had many times before. The door clicked open and that sickly-sweet smell filled his nostrils again.

Climbing the stairs, he pushed through the ‘FUCK’ing door and saw Lola sitting there, reading her books, listening to her music – cooler than cool.

“Well, look who it is”, she said, then noticing his suit and adding patronizingly, “Looking fancy this afternoon, aren’t we?”

Lincoln had little time for her nonsense. He also felt so much more empowered than the last time they had exchanged ‘pleasantries’.

“Hey, look, I know Edie doesn’t work here any more, but I was wondering if you knew where I might be able to find her? Even if you just gave me a... a phone number or something. I just really want to find her.”

Lola’s air of arrogance switched to one of bemusement, “What do you mean; she doesn’t work here any more? She’s with a client right now.”

Now it was Lincoln who was confused.

“What? No, she can’t be. I paid her debts for her. She was gonna go start a new life away from this place”, he said.

“I’m telling you, mister, she’s down there right now with a fella”, Lola said. Neither of them seemed to know exactly what was up. Before Lola could say anything else, however, Lincoln stormed into the dark hallway where all the dens of fake love leered.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?” Lola called out after him, following him down the hall. Lincoln burst into the room that he knew was Edie’s. To his horror, there she was, being the thing of lust for some guy.

“Edie...” he said, baffled and heartbroken. Both her and the guy turned in total shock to see Lincoln at the door.

“Lincoln!” Edie exclaimed.

“Yo, what the fuck?” the guy said, “Wait your goddamn turn, man! I ain’t finished in here!”

“Edie, what are you doing?” Lincoln asked, ignoring the guy.

“What does it look she’s doing, man?” the guy said back.

“Shut up!” Lincoln shouted at him.

“Everyone shut up!” Lola said, cramming herself into the room with a loaded revolver held at the ready. The presence of the silver gun made everyone freeze; confused, angry, or otherwise.

“Edie... any idea what the fuck is going on here?” Lola asked, keeping the gun pointed at Lincoln. Edie quickly ducked away from her client and held a pillow over her naked body for some privacy.

“Katie, you can put the gun away. Nobody here needs to get shot, alright?” Edie said to Lola, using her real name in the hope it would help resonate her call for calm a little more. Unsure what was happening, but trusting Edie’s judgement, Lola lowered the gun.

“Lincoln”, Edie started, “I’ll explain everything, I swear. But right now, we just have to get the hell out of here, okay?”

Totally out of the loop, Lincoln too trusted Edie’s judgement. The only one who seemed unhappy was the client, “What? You’re just gonna go? It’s not even been twenty minutes!”

“Katie, give this guy his money back”, Edie said to Lola, hoping to resolve at least that part of the chaos. Lola nodded, “Okay. But, Edie, you gotta tell me, this is the guy Gio was telling us to be on the lookout for, right?”

Lola shot Lincoln a nervous look as Edie nodded to her, “Yeah, this is him. But don’t worry, I’m gonna sort it, okay?”

Edie then looked to her unsatisfied customer, “Get dressed, get a refund, get out, alright?”

Not wanting to get caught up in what seemed like an absolute disaster waiting to happen, the client nodded obligingly. Edie continued to diffuse the situation.

“Katie, go sort this guy out, sit back down in the front room and forget that any of this ever happened, okay?”

Lola nodded, she backed out of the room. The client quickly pulled his pants on and shuffled out of the room, grumbling in annoyance and fear as he went, “Fuck this place.”

At last, it was just Lincoln and Edie in the room, as it had been all those times before. A few tense seconds passed before the walls seemed to move apart and calm

returned to the room. Their breathing slowing to a semi-normal rate, the two looked to each other, not sure who should or would speak first.

“Edie, what are you doing here?” Lincoln finally asked, pain obvious in his voice.

“I promise you, I’ll explain everything. But right now, your life’s in danger and we have to get the hell out of here”, Edie said, tossing the pillow aside and scrambling for her clothes. Lincoln watched her get hastily dressed, too confused and concerned to appreciate her naked form.

When she had gotten dressed, she simply made her way to the door, grabbing Lincoln by the hand and pulling him along with her. She led them down the stairs towards the back entrance and back into the blistering sunlight on the street.

“Edie, what’s happening?”

“Not yet!”

Edie quickly walked down the blue-collar streets, Lincoln not leaving her shadow. Both of their heads were running at a million miles an hour. With the pace Edie had set, in high heels no less, they were soon at her apartment. Urging Lincoln inside, she then locked her door and took a moment to breathe.

“Edie, for fuck sake! Talk to me! Where are we? What’s going on? Why are you still working in that shithole?” Lincoln fired question after question at her. Edie sat on her sofa and tried to figure out how to tell Lincoln what was going on.

“I have a lot explain”, she said.

“Yeah, you do, I gave you twenty thousand dollars to get you out of that place!”

“Okay, well... things didn’t exactly happen the way you think they did. When I took that money to Gio, my pimp, you know, the guy we were gonna see before we saw the judge in the newspaper? He... well, okay, so there’s even more I have to tell you. I didn’t owe him twenty grand, I only owed ten. But when you asked me how much debt I had, I thought you might offer to pay it off for me, which you did, so I doubled it just in case. I was gonna use the extra money to start my new life, you know? But when I took the

money to Gio, he found the extra ten that I was gonna keep. Then he beat me up. Then he made me tell him where I got all that cash from. I didn't have much choice, so I told him about you. I didn't tell him about what you were doing or the judge or anything like that, I just told him that you wanted to set me free... But then he threatened to kill me if I didn't try keep you in New York. He wanted to use me as bait to get to you so that he could take whatever money you have left and kill you."

Lincoln's heart now resembled the sands of Iraq in which he fought; busted up into countless pieces.

"You lied about loving me?" he asked.

"I don't know what love is, I honestly don't. I mean, I like you, I think... It was a fucked up thing to do, I know, but I was just trying to keep you from going off with that judge—"

"So that you have me murdered?!" he spat angrily.

"No! I didn't know what I was going to do if you had stayed. I was thinking we'd figure something out. I'm sorry, Lincoln... I'm so sorry, I'm a terrible person, I'm a piece of shit, I know."

Lincoln paced back and forth, just as his world was going from black to light and then back to black again.

"So, how come you're not dead then?"

"When you went off with the judge, I didn't know what to do, so I called Gio and told him you'd gone, that'd I had lost you. He said because I had been honest with him, that he'd still let me work off what I owed him. But he won't let me off this time, not knowing I've let you get away again."

"How would he know?"

"That girl Katie – Lola – whatever you wanna call her, all the girls working for Gio have been told to rat you out if they see you. She's terrified of him, we all are. She'll be calling him right now, I bet."

“I’m guessing this asshole knows where you live, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“So why the fuck would you bring us here?!”

“I had to explain things to you, I wasn’t gonna do it in the goddamn street! But now we really have to go. He and his crew will be looking for us.”

Lincoln finally stopped pacing and turned to look at Edie, his eyes full of anger.

“We? Why we? I think you’ve shown pretty well that you can look after yourself.”

“Lincoln, please, take me with you. I can’t survive his whole crew by myself. I have no money, nowhere to go.”

“Why in the hell should I take you with me? I tried to help you!” he shouted, before pausing and looking to her, “For all I know, you’re the Devil in human form.”

“I tried to help you too, before everything went bad.”

“Only because I paid you twenty fucking thousand dollars!”

To this, Edie had no comeback. All she could do was sit there and watch Lincoln pace back and forth, back and forth, like a clock ticking away their seconds of safety.

“Where have you been?” she ended up asking.

“Seriously? You want me to explain what I’ve spent my whole life searching for in the single minute we have left?” he fired back.

“Did you meet whoever you were wanting to meet?”

Lincoln shook his head, he couldn’t believe what was happening, how things could take such a drastically wrong turn. Then, as he thought about who he did meet, the master stuck out and something came to him, something he felt might right some of all these wrongs.

“You know Jesus Christ?”

“What?”

“Jesus Christ! You’ve heard of him, right?”

“Well, of course, but... what, you saying you met Jesus?”

“No, I didn’t meet Jesus! Jesus Christ... But he loved a hooker too, like me. Mary Magdalene. Some people think she wasn’t a hooker, but whatever, she was a Jerusalem whore he fell in love with – or something, my bible classes never got much attention. Anyway, you know what his greatest power was? It wasn’t his ability to walk on water or turn water into wine, it was his power to forgive. Forgiveness was his greatest miracle, forgiveness *is* the greatest miracle. You say you’re a terrible person? Well, so am I. I’ve been a real monster in my time. I’m starting to think I deserve for this Gio guy to come kill me, I think I deserve what might be coming my way. But I also think that the only chance I have, the only way I can ever redeem myself is by forgiving you. So, yeah, let’s get the hell out of here together right now. But once we’re safe, you’ll have to find out your own way to redeem yourself in your own eyes.”

Edie hadn’t followed exactly how Lincoln had come to the conclusion that he should take her with her, but for the moment she didn’t care. All she knew was that they needed to get out of her apartment, out of Greenpoint – now.

“Alright”, she said, getting to her feet, “Let’s hurry.”

“They don’t know where I live, do they?” Lincoln asked.

“No.”

“Then that’s where go for now. We’ll make our next move from there.”

Keeping to the quietest streets of Greenpoint, tracing their way through abandoned industrial lots and cutting through stone gardens brightened with graffiti, they made their way to the Bedford Avenue subway station. From there they could catch the L-line under the East River to Lincoln’s apartment.

The urban decay and the fearful adrenaline rush almost brought on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Lincoln, so similar was the feeling to his time in the Middle East.

As they ducked from one safe vantage point to another, behind skips and fences and piles of bricks, Lincoln’s mind did flash images of Iraqi kids running about. In the

scorching New York heat and blinding sunshine, the women of Greenpoint momentarily became the women of Ramadi and Karbala, their black hijabs rippling in the breeze.

After a particularly strong flashback, Lincoln found himself needing to pause and regain his breath and composure in a little side alley.

“Are you okay?” Edie asked fearfully.

“Yeah, I’m fine”, he said.

They carried on towards the Bedford Avenue station, keeping a constant lookout for the Bear and his crew who were potentially combing the area looking for them. After making it a few more blocks, a police siren sounded nearby, propelling Lincoln headlong into a full on flashback. Suddenly, he found himself back in Iraq. He saw his Sergeant walking in front of him, leading the way, his beige uniform and helmet and all. An instant later, they were surrounded by insurgents and his Sergeant was shot dead. With no weapon in his hands to defend himself, Lincoln began breathing heavily to the point of hyperventilating. His vision blurred and began to spin. He collapsed in the middle of the street.

“Lincoln!” Edie cried, “What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

Her voice slowly pulled him back to reality, back to Brooklyn. He shook his head and tried to get back to his feet and keep moving. However, after a few steps, his disorientated mind made him stagger and he fell a second time.

Knowing they weren’t far from Bedford Avenue, Edie didn’t bother waiting for him to answer, and put Lincoln’s arm around her shoulder, helping him the rest of the way. His vision had become so blurry that he could barely register what was happening as they entered the subway station. In the vile heat of the underground, they waited for their train to the East Village.

Lincoln’s breathing kept its pace, but slowed enough for him to remain conscious. Their train came hurtling along and Edie quickly found them seats. A number of startled passengers kept their distance from the them.

After sweeping under the East River back into Manhattan, theirs was the first stop. Only Edie was of sound enough mind to be thankful that they had gotten out of Greenpoint in one piece and were now on 1st Avenue in the East Village. Thankfully, Edie remembered which apartment building was Lincoln's, as he could barely see straight. She got them both to the front door.

"Lincoln, we're at your apartment. I need your keys", she said, her panic slowly dying away. With a shaking hand, he reached into his pocket and handed his keys to her. She unlocked the door and got them off the streets at last.

Lincoln's apartment was just as they had left it a few days before, nice and modern, but totally soulless. The blanket was still on the couch where they had slept. The whiskey bottle still on the table from one of his earlier binges.

Helping Lincoln through his final few steps to the couch, they both collapsed in a heap of exhaustion, pulses beating faster than the train that had carried them to safety. A few more minutes of delirium ensued for Lincoln with Edie at his side, but eventually he re-emerged from what had been his most serious episode of PTSD.

"Everything's okay, Lincoln, we're at your apartment, we're safe now", Edie said repeatedly, trying to reassure him.

He looked to her, a dazed sort of fear in his eyes. Gradually, he came to understand what had just happened and where they were. The moment was marked by him reaching out at her and pulling her in tight for a huge embrace. At first, Edie was a little shocked, even scared, at this hug, but then she felt its safety and fell into it.

They managed a sort of manic laughter together before releasing each other and coming to rest properly on the couch.

"Holy shit", Lincoln finally said.

"Yeah", Edie shared his sentiment.

"You're a piece of work, Edie, you know that? You just saved my fucking life."

Eddie didn't know what to say other than to comment of the sweat running off them, "Both of us look like shit."

At this, they again managed a sort of laugh.

"I think we're even now", Lincoln said, "You sure work fast."

Tears welled up in Eddie's eyes; the stress, the fear, the emotion – the forgiveness – it all hit her at once. She wiped her eyes and smiled to him.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"You know, I came back to New York looking for you not just because I thought you loved me, but to tell you that you were right all along."

"I'm sorry I lied to you, I didn't know what else to do", she said shamefully.

He looked to her and could sense her apology was genuine, "Forget about it. Honestly, that doesn't matter. What really matters is what I found out. It was what you had told me when I first started this stupid journey."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't know how to react when I asked you who the most powerful person in you knew was. You sorta awkwardly avoided it and then just tried to seduce me with sweet nothings by saying that *I* was. You remember that?"

Eddie cast her mind back to that night and vaguely nodded.

"Well, whether you remember it or not, that's what you said. And you were right, even if you didn't mean it. *We are* the most powerful people in the world – all of us. Every single person on this planet has the ability to control their own future. Forget the assholes in the buildings. They think their actions dominate our lives like their buildings dominate our cities – but they don't! The people can control themselves if they really want to. We do have the power to change things. We can fix this place. We can fix this world. There is hope. It is worth believing in..." Lincoln said passionately before adding, "Sorry for ranting, but that's what I wanted to tell you. You are the most powerful person in the world, Eddie. You."

“That wasn’t a rant”, Edie said with a grateful smile, “Rants don’t make sense.”

For the next few minutes, they just sat there, holding each other.

Lincoln and Edie.

This could have been their moment to finally connect. This could have been it, but...

A crashing noise was heard somewhere in the front of building. Both got to their feet, unsure if it heralded something coming for them or if it was totally unrelated to the Bear. Their hearts sank as they heard the thunder of footsteps running down the hall – somehow, the Bear had found them.

The door to Lincoln’s apartment was forced open by some large muscle of the Bear’s crew. Nowhere to run, Edie and Lincoln remained standing, holding each other, and watched as five of the Bear’s savage looking henchmen filed into the apartment. They all had silencers on the end of their handguns. They all pointed them at Edie and Lincoln. A few seconds later, the Bear himself arrived.

He had a look of absolute glee on his face.

Chapter Twelve
NEW YORK IS ALIVE

“Hey!” the Bear said happily, menacingly, “You happy to see me, princess?”

“How did find this place?” Edie asked without even realizing it. The Bear walked over to the table with the bottle of whiskey on, pulled up a chair and sat down. He admired the apartment for a moment, letting his prey fret, before answering her question.

“Oh, it’s a good story”, he began with that sick joy on his face, “It’s a real good story, alright. You see, you two fuckers blackmailed a very good o’ mine. You had some little fuckin’ scheme goin’ on, I dunno what, I don’t really care – but you sure as fuck pissed him off.”

The Bear paused midway through his story to unscrew the cap on the whiskey bottle and take a swig. He showed and clenched his teeth with the taste.

“Ah, that’s good stuff”, he continued, pointing at Lincoln, “Anyway, this piece of shit was supposed to have been taken care of. My friend got very upset when he learned that this fuck somehow weaseled his way outta it. Very upset. So he contacts me, tells me what my star little whore has been up to and gives me all the information I need to catch this guy, should he ever show his face again. And whaddya know? He does. Well, I’ll tell you somethin’ – you ain’t gonna slip outta this one. Nobody gets past the Bear.”

The Bear took another sip, shaking his head as the whiskey went down his throat.

“Woo! That’s really good stuff”, he said to Lincoln.

Just then, a middle aged woman living elsewhere in the apartment building appeared at the door.

“What’s all damn noise for?” she said, before realizing what she had walked into. The Bear looked to one of his men who grabbed this woman before she could scream. He shuffled her off, the Bear calling after him, “Don’t kill her, just tell her what’ll happen if she talks!”

“Is it money you want?” Lincoln asked, refocusing the room on him.

“Oh, you’re a smart man”, the Bear said, cupping his hands together as if catching the condescension in his own voice, “You’re a smart man.”

“Then let Edie go”, Lincoln said sternly, “Let her go and I’ll give you all the money I have.” Edie was too frightened to speak as the Bear thought about the proposal.

“Alright, I have no use for this gal, you’ve got yourself a deal”, the Bear said, hinting with a jerk of his head for Edie to go. She didn’t know what to do, she simply froze.

“Edie – go”, Lincoln said to her, not taking his eyes off the Bear. She tried to speak but couldn’t find the words.

“Go!” Lincoln shouted, looking to her with pained eyes.

“I don’t wanna leave you”, she said to him.

“I told everything I learned about this life. Go make good use of it.”

“I don’t wanna leave you”, she repeated.

“Don’t make us both die in this room... Please... go.”

She knew what was about to happen, which is why leaving Lincoln was so hard for her to do. Lincoln felt like it took an age for her to reach the door to the apartment. Before she left, she turned to him and said, “You also taught me what love is.”

“Thank-you”, Lincoln said, knowing what she meant. He soaked in as much of her beautiful face as he could before she left and added one final thing, “Don’t do anything to stop this. Don’t do anything stupid. Just run, go live that life, it’s all there waiting for you. It’s as beautiful as you are.”

Ripping herself away from him, Edie ran out of the apartment. Lincoln had never felt such pain and relief at the same time.

“Edie’s free”, he thought to himself with bliss.

“Well, that was fuckin’ amazing”, the Bear mocked, ““You also taught me what love is”? Jesus wept! You gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me! You taught a whore how to love – that’s no mean feat, my friend. Well done.”

Lincoln didn’t say anything, the Bear wasn’t worth it.

“Okay, so let’s do this”, the Bear said. One of his men placed a laptop on the table. The Bear opened it up and typed in the password. “Come, sit”, he said to Lincoln, gesturing for him to have a seat and transfer all his life’s savings.

“I would try reason with you, but I can tell you aren’t a reasonable man”, Lincoln said as he sat down and made the last transaction of his life.

“You’re right. I’m an animal. It’s why they call me the Bear.”

With a few keystrokes, Lincoln gave everything he had to the Bear. After it was done, he sat back in his seat and pointed to the whiskey, “You wouldn’t mind if I have a final drink?”

“I take back what I said, I’m not an animal – help yourself”, the Bear said, handing him the bottle. Lincoln drank his last drink and savored every last sensation he would have. He couldn’t help but laugh in the face of such a tragic situation.

“Money. Fucking money”, Lincoln said in despair. The despair wasn’t for his own life, however, rather for the lives of these men in the room with him.

“Beautiful, ain’t it?” the Bear smirked.

“That’s all people like you want. It’s all you have. It’s all you’ll ever have. I, however, I have something so much more valuable – you could never *dream* of being as rich as it makes me. It’s why I’m not afraid of you killing me right now”, Lincoln said.

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?” the Bear asked.

“Hope”, Lincoln said, finding a peaceful state of mind to die in just in the mere utterance of the word. This made the Bear and his pack of animals laugh, but it was hollow laughter, frightened laughter. They were frightened that a man could be so content with the immaterial world, it made their souls scream out to their superficial existences. Then, to erase their fear, all the men in the room made their guns make sharp, violent whispers.

And with death’s indifference, Lincoln’s life ended.

Meanwhile – Edie ran.

She ran and she ran and she ran. She had no idea where she was going. She had little idea that she was even running – or even still alive.

Tears streaming down her face, she was eventually stopped by an NYPD officer, somewhere on Third Avenue.

“Yo, ma’am, ma’am! Calm down! Calm down! What’s going on?” he asked her. She was in no state to talk, she simply crumpled in the street, distraught and overwhelmed with grief. She knew Lincoln was dead, somehow she just knew.

“Talk to me, ma’am, tell me what’s happening”, the cop said.

“They killed him! They killed him!” she shrieked, causing quite a scene for the New Yorkers passing by. The cop’s partner stood nearby and radioed for help.

“Who? Who did they kill?” the cop asked, but she couldn’t overcome the pain to speak, “C’mon, talk to me, ma’am!”

Edie wailed in the street, the echo of her pain was heard for blocks.

Six months later...

Winter’s snow majestically fell – white from the black night sky above. It fell from that high place without purpose, only grace, swirling in faint, unseeable currents of air. Snowfall such as this carries no memory of warmth, but when it melts it can bring about

the reminiscence of kind, tender moments deep within the hearts of nearly all people, even those who have never braced against a cold night, never felt the icy whip of needles on their faces, or perhaps, especially for those who find this coolness to be of a foreign nature. Flowing downwards in an constant, effortless drift, snowflakes breathed down towards the earth below, down from the clouds of gloomed-shades of silver, though now; silver-lined.

In John F. Kennedy International Airport, Edie sat by the glass of the large terminal window, quietly looking outside across the tarmac as it slowly frosted over with the gentle snow. A boarding pass acted as a bookmark beside her. She watched as the planes taxied back and forth through the cold. The heat of that nightmare-June felt as far away as she herself would soon be...

The atmosphere in the airport was unlike anything she'd ever really experienced before. It wasn't the chaos that felt alien, she was a New Yorker after all. It was the feeling of happiness that accompanied the hectic rush. Like a piece of melancholic music swelling up, Edie felt excitement flowing through her.

"This is what joy must be", she thought to herself.

Just then, a boy ran up to the window quite close to her, giving her a little fright. He pressed his hands and face up to the glass, in awe of the activity outside. The father of the boy tailed behind him and smiled apologetically to Edie.

"Sorry", he said.

"That's alright", she replied.

"I'm just trying to kill a bit of time", he said, before adding dryly, "Never travel with kids."

Edie smiled at the advice and watched as the boy pointed out the planes to his father. She caught herself imagining that one day she might have a little boy of her own, and in her mind she decided what she would call him.

Along with his name, she knew she would teach him what it had cost a man his life to teach her – “You are the most powerful person in the world.”