

KING DANIEL

THE LOST & FOUNDS: BOOK 6

BY EDMOND MANNING

FIRST, A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR...

Hey.

Thanks for showing up.

If you're reading these chapters, you're reading for the "sriracha" version of *The Lost and Founds*. Good for you. Spice of life, type stuff.

Vin Vanbly is odd, and the telling of his stories must reflect this oddness. Just go with it. Part of the grand adventure. If you're here looking to explore the Heightened Cliffhanger sequence, here's your guide.

1. Read *King Perry*.
2. In *King Daniel* (the sixth book—not yet published), read chapters 1-3.
3. Read *Kin Mai*.
4. In *King Daniel*, read chapters 4-7.
5. Read *The Butterfly King*.
6. In *King Daniel*, read chapters 8-10.
7. Read *King John*.
8. In *King Daniel*, read chapter 11.
9. Read *Come Back To Me*.
10. Finish *King Daniel* (to be release in early 2017).

The chess pieces are on the board. Vin Vanbly. Daniel Connors. The prophecies. The king whose initials are DC. The Great Remembering. What happened to Vin in 2005? What role does Daniel play in *The Lost and Founds*?

Enjoy exploring the world of the Found Kings in 2013, the year *King Daniel* takes place.

All my love,

EDMOND MANNING

The events of this novel take place in 2013

CHAPTER 1

To me, it sounds like an urban legend.

One of those ludicrous ghost stories found online, huddled around our modern-day campfires—blogs.

We park our butts before glowing laptop screens and lean in closer, some alluring link sparking curiosity, underlined words tethering one person to another to another to another, until somehow we're reading a 52-year-old Arkansas woman's life story, chronicling her vegetable garden and villainous mother-in-law. The sixteen-year-old girl in Seattle who reviews TV episodes, the music hipster in Mississippi who began blogging after Hurricane Katrina. Twelve-step blogs, cake decorating blogs, adoption blogs, application to graduate school blogs, and then the weird-shit blogs: awful first dates, terrible roommates, and disastrous family gatherings. Everyone has a story to tell, even if the tale isn't ours: "You won't believe what I heard last night. My neighbors screamed for two hours, and then..."

These are our campfires.

As night grows longer, the tales grow softer, deeper in their nature. We crowd around one another, legs bumping nervously, as strangers question how to live, what kind of destiny to shape for their unfolding lives. This is how we find each other, those of us who live in liminal space,

through blogs, electronic wings fluttering and humming vibrations that whisper, “Am I alone in this? Are you out there, too?”

I have no doubt when future technology permits a harmless fire blowing out a serial port, we’ll roast marshmallows.

Urban legends. Ghost stories.

Three days ago I read an urban legend whopper, and a ghost story too, I guess. Chasing link after link, I stumbled across a stranger’s blog, his most recent entry demanding in all caps: REMEMBER THE KING.

Like every good campfire tale, his began, “I swear this is totally true. This happened to me. Well, not to me, but a good friend of mine. His name is Perry.”

In a dozen paragraphs, the blogger summarized how one October weekend back in 1999, Perry—guided by a San Francisco tourist—came to believe himself “a king.” Because more than a decade had passed, the anonymous blogger felt he could at last reveal highlights, if none of the specifics, regarding his pal’s King Weekend.

The capitalization caught my attention. I’m less inclined to follow UFO blogs or sewer alligator stories—no, I’m captivated instead by the insanity in how we treat each other, urban legends of human behavior. I follow a blog devoted to passive-aggressive handwritten notes, two evil coworker blogs, and a few sites where gay men kiss and *eagerly* tell of their raunchiest adventures. I remain amazed by those: why would you sleep with someone like that? But I admit, I like reading bizarre humiliations in others’ lives, which make my own failings feel more manageable.

King Weekend was capitalized, like Space Camp or a trademarked Disney cruise. When I Googled it, I discovered millions of hits, which means nobody officially claimed it, branded it. How odd. To not develop your brand is a capital crime in our capitalist world.

The blog explained how a chance encounter in art gallery brought Perry in contact with this tourist, some Midwesterner who offered to change Perry's life. He challenged Perry to submit fully—sexually and non-sexually—for one weekend. In return, he would help Perry remember his true kingship, whatever the hell that meant.

For reasons not elaborated, Perry agreed, submitting to the tourist as they journeyed around San Francisco. The weekend included a flute-playing king from Somalia, a stolen duck, starfish hunting, and a smashed birthday cake. I didn't quite swallow the tale. Sneaking around Alcatraz, abandoned on top of Mount Tamalpais, crazy details way over-embellished. If you're going to make shit up, at least make it believable. But if you believed in fairy tales, the erotic and verbal ravishment left Perry ravaged by grief, and somehow stronger, more fully alive. The blogger claimed after his King Weekend, Perry loved with "all his love."

All his love.

Beyond the obvious, I'm not sure what those words mean.

Soon after that October weekend, Perry vacationed in Australia, where he played his cello naked in the outback. A local rancher heard funereal music echoing off an outcropping of rocks and figured Death had come for him early, to end his lonely days. He emptied his pockets on his kitchen table, left a note for a brother in Sydney, and took his trombone into the desert to play one final duet. Instead of finding Death, the lonely rancher found a naked cellist and he fell in love.

Perry fell back.

They've been together for thirteen years, according to the blogger, who swore these details were true.

The blog shared only Perry's first name, no details I could Google.

It's urban legend bullshit.

Very little was revealed about the shadowy figure who orchestrated this thing, the King Weekend, just the man's nickname, the Human Ghost. This ghost was quoted, exact words apparently spoken to Perry at the adventure's onset, "Once there was a tribe of men, a tribe populated entirely of kings. Odd you may think, and wonder how anything got done with everyone making rules. But these were not those kind of kings."

Perry never forgot.

One detail shocked me until I realized it had to be fake, more bullshit. The surprise was not within the blog itself, merely a comment added by a visitor like me, no more than two hours prior. It read, "Many years ago, I also spent a weekend with Vin Vanbly. I remember who I was always meant to be. Have I found my brothers at last?—King Mai the Curious."

No way.

Curious indeed, King Mai, but nothing more than a good campfire story and everyone loves letting the smoke get in their eyes; it just smells woodsy. I smelled bullshit. In fact, the King Mai comment was most likely added by the blogger himself, an intriguing twist to make it seem realistic. And Vin Vanbly? Awfully fake-sounding name, like a never-quite-made-it action hero. I toyed with the idea of leaving a smart-ass comment and my king name immediately popped into mind.

King Schadenfreude.

My cynical smirk melted as I thought about what that king name reveals about me. I like reading about other peoples' misfortune. Not death or dismemberment, but humiliations and life failures. What's wrong with me? Why must I dwell on the worst in people? I decided not to comment. The world has enough smart-asses.

The next day, a single detail nagged me, buzzed around my skull while I folded laundry, reasserting itself later while fixing the kitchen sink, the Lost Kings. In addition to Perry's specific adventure, the blog explained how many of the Found Kings left their sparkling kingdom, got lost, and lived anonymously in the world of man. I could not remember if the story specifically explained what happened to Lost Kings.

It bugged me.

Almost 24 hours later, I returned to reread Perry's tale, yet found no clue revealing the fate of Lost Kings. I experienced a second shock to discover the comment from King Mai the Curious had been removed. Why? Every other visitor comment remained intact, including one promising LIVE RUSSIAN GIRLS. Why remove that comment and leave web spam?

Three days have passed, and I find myself staring at the screen late tonight once again, not quite able to let go. *What happens to Lost Kings?* Even though I do not believe in this King Weekend business, I find myself making a decision, steeling myself to breach the anonymous internet for confirmation. While trying to dissuade myself from this course of action, I simultaneously refine exact wording for my lie. Using one of my fake Yahoo accounts, I type an email directly to the blogger instead of leaving a website comment.

Hi,

This is going to sound peculiar. I think I know the Human Ghost. Vin Vanbly, right? He took me on a King Weekend, too.

King Michael

I know it's stupid to care, but this campfire piqued my curiosity. Plus, it's not like I gave my real name. I almost sign it King Michael the Brave, or King Michael the Daring but I don't want to use a name someone else in their little club might have, so best to play it vague until I tease more information from them.

Hell, I've got nothing better to do anyway, just internet surfing. Jacking off. I don't go out much, only to grab food from restaurants that don't deliver or buy my essentials. No job. No obligations. I don't contribute much to the real world and I might worry about that, but the real world doesn't seem to care. I don't know when it happened exactly, but I've abandoned the idea of finding a boyfriend. Or real-world friends, I guess. I've got sixty-four Facebook friends I've never met. Do I really know them? Do they know me?

Late at night, I blog, and ask the questions, "Am I alone in this? Are you out there, too?"

Within hours, the blogger replies. He explains Perry in Australia is delighted to meet another Found King. "Just to confirm," Perry instructed his blogger pal to type in the reply, "Please describe how Found Kings sometimes greet each other."

Well, crap.

There might be thousands of words, phrases, secret code like, "vanilla pudding blow torch" or something equally absurd. A King Arthur genuflect seems antiquated. "Your majesty..." with a sweep of the arms feels, well, too *Desperate Housewives*. I should remain wary; they probably want money or a PayPal account number for some outlandish scam. But in

case this fucked-up tale is not entirely fucked, I choose a simple bluff which I hope might prolong our conversation.

“With respect,” I type. “That’s what Vin taught me. Treat each other with honor.”

I click Send.

A day passes with no reply.

Then another.

On the third day of silence, it’s clear. They know I lied. Spooky.

“Once there was a tribe, populated entirely of kings...”

No.

No, it’s a lie. There are no kings. Sure, there are good men around. I guess. But you can’t appoint yourself a king and then believe it, let that special knowledge guide you to do things you would never do, live in a way you had only dared to dream, but required some missing light, something golden necessary to shine through you. It’s not possible.

But who is Vin Vanbly?

And what happens to a Lost King if he doesn’t get found?

Does he just stay lost?

CHAPTER 2

I read the entire stupid blog searching for clues and feel a sharp pang of regret I didn't try to trick Perry into revealing his last name. He and his blogger friend won't answer another email; I lied to them. My Yahoo email address might even be blocked.

I should let it go, forget it. Once again, electronic campfires have kept me awake much too late. Kings, however, are on my mind. I wonder if the Human Ghost still roams Alcatraz, alone, at night. I call bullshit on that detail, too. Nobody spends twenty years camping on Alcatraz in secret. Someone would find out. It would be reported in the papers or bragged about online.

Of course, I Google Vincent Vanbly, which leads nowhere. He's a Google zero hitter, an internet ghost. The only related hits name a few paid-for links to the Department of Motor Vehicles and www.carfax.com. Google only recognizes V-I-N as Vehicle Identification Number.

I pay a few bucks for one of those former classmate searches, casting a wide net, resulting in nothing.

He doesn't exist. I knew it. Fake.

Over the next week, more commenters post, saying things like, “Cool fuckin’ story.”
Someone typed, “I owned a duck once. LOL. they smelld bad!!!! P.U!!!!!!!!!!”

This is where my simple interest should die, but I can’t let go.

According to the blog, Perry moved to a sheep ranch in Australia. I Google a number of Australian cities, combining relevant words, like, “Perry” and “ranch.” I find nothing. Perth is the biggest city in Western Australia, so I search for “Perry” combined with “Perth.”

50,000 links result.

Well, fuck. Why are so many Perth men named Perry?

I click and I read. Click and read, click and read, click and read.

The first two dozen links reveal nothing. This is not a smart way to search the internet.

What’s Perry’s last fucking name?

I reread the blog.

On Wikipedia, I research surrealist painters, reading the section on their personal lives for mention of a son, but the blog said Perry’s father was never famous. The birthday cake dropped by the Human Ghost displayed Perry’s full name as an anagram. I check again. The full anagram wasn’t revealed.

Dammit.

Can I make a girl’s name out of *P-E-R-R-Y*. No, nothing.

Damn.

Some clue must—

The cello.

I search again, combining three words: Perry, cello, Perth.

The third link sounds promising, describing Perry Mangin, an American hobby-cellist who gives warmly received concerts in Perth. He's not orchestra level, a local eccentric whose occasional performances are always packed to capacity. Devotees queue up early, eager to hear the sorrow in his eulogy hymns, his throaty, joyful inventions, the heartbreaking tension he creates each time. Smaller musical venues, I gather from other links, but a welcome treat for citizens of Perth.

His sister, Cecilia, often accompanies him on the piano.

One review, three years old, describes Perry and Cecilia giggling throughout a jazzy improv, never faltering in a single note while using sibling rivalry to one-up each other. When their riff concluded, both fell over, laughing and rolling around. The audience roared into a thundering ovation. This rattled Perry's pet ducks, who often join him on stage. They leapt aloft, chasing each other madly, quacking and flapping their wings. The reviewer deplored the lack of professionalism in modern musicians, reminding his readers these two were *Americans*.

I can't help but smile.

Another link leads to a Sunday magazine interview about local musicians. When questioned about his faithful following, this strange musician replied, "I play with all my love."

All my love.

It's him. I found him.

Now that I know whom I'm looking for, it's easy to find more links.

He's a financial advisor, completely internet-based. He advises big non-profit groups and favors those who fund cancer-related research. In 2004, he was named Philanthropist of the Year by one of these charity clients, and he must have earned them a bundle, because they flew him to Boston for an award ceremony.

According to the jovial tone of their online newsletter, they explained if he would *rather* play the cello, he wouldn't be *required* to give a boring acceptance speech. They'd rent one for him. No trouble at all, the article teased Perry agreed. The newsletter struck a more somber note when describing how Perry performed music he composed himself, titled *The Lost Ones*, during which audience members wept openly.

What the fuck happens to Lost Kings?

On his niece's Instagram, I find a photo of Perry and his Aussie lover sitting on the same horse. The Aussie is much younger than I imagined, his unruly blond hair and askew face look as if he recently awoke, surprised to find himself upright in a saddle. He looks friendly, too. Surprised and friendly.

Behind him sits Perry Mangin. Perry looks so...normal. He's definitely handsome, but he's not celebrity handsome. He's just some hot guy in his 40's wearing a cowboy hat. A guy with stupid love on his face, playing *Brokeback Mountain* but with a different ending.

They raise sheep.

I stare into the eyes of King Perry the Forgiver.

Instead of feeling better, I feel worse.

I don't want to be a Lost King.

It's not hard to find Perry's email address; he teaches advanced economics classes for a local university. According to their website, his next two offerings are booked full. There is a lengthy waiting list.

But I have already lied to Perry, burned that bridge. I'm sad suddenly, sad because I lied, because that's who I am sometimes to get what I want in life. This isn't who I want to be. I don't like thinking to myself, "I am a liar. I am someone who lies."

In this frame of mind, I compose an email.

King Perry,

Forgive me. I lied to your blogger friend because I didn't want to admit how much your story meant to me. I pretended to be "King Michael." I was afraid you wouldn't answer if I was just me. I lied because that's the way the world works sometimes, you lie to get what you want. I don't like being this way but I don't know how to have "faith in Bolinas." I'm truly sorry. I ask your forgiveness.

I found you on the web, nothing too invasive, just good guesses when searching. I am desperate to know if your story is true. Did all that really happen on Alcatraz and with the King Quackers on a mountain top? If you don't respond to this email, I promise I will never bother you again. I give you my absolute promise. I'm not a stalker.

I guess I'm writing because what I urgently want to know is this. What happens to Lost Kings? Ironically, I must beg you, please don't lie to me. I'm thirty-six, and I'm too young to give up on the world, but I can't see much reason to stick around.

I don't want to be a Lost King anymore. I'm tired. I want to come home.

Daniel (my real name)

I use my primary email account, the real me. I include my blog address. Yet, I hesitate. After I click Send, he could read about me, if he wants, my views on the world, my favorite music, my links, my whole online life. Of course, there's no personal details revealing my identity in the world. I refuse to be located by anyone from my former life. Still, sharing my blog

with Perry is my best answer to the question, “What would you risk?” It’s not much, but it’s all I have to offer.

After rereading my shamelessly begging email, I find myself embarrassed. If I click Send, I look like an idiot. I’m admitting I believe in this urban legend. It’s as ridiculous as bear walking in public, something I could never do.

Fuck it.

I click Send.

Three agonizing days later, his reply appears. As soon as I see who it’s from, I collapse into my chair and read the words, my heart pounding.

Daniel,

This is the only time I will reply. Do not write me again. Do not ask questions about what I tell you. Accept this as is, and share this story with no one. This is how you know you are forgiven, Daniel, for in this email, I trust you with a very private part of my life story, something I value beyond measure. I ask you not to betray any part of my trust, not six months from now, in ten years, or twenty. This trust is how I show you all my love.

A bunch of men Vin kinged were early internet adopters, guys he met through AOL and CompuServe. But Vin had been kinging men earlier than the internet, through personal ads in magazines or men he met on vacation, like me. By the time I connected with the others, they had already begun to refer to our tribe as The VV, a tribute to the man who found us, a man whose initials happen to look like a crown.

We know of men Vin kinged in Italy, Japan, Canada, and several in England. Vin’s kings live in more than a dozen cities around the United States. Vin liked to travel. Yet we are not

convinced we have found all our king brothers. Vin never issued a roster, as he felt it disrespectful. We honor his decision, but want to make sure any man he kinged can find us if he chooses.

This is challenging because The VV prefers to keep a low profile.

One among us, a king we call DC, suggested every other year we dangle bait on the internet, if only for a few months. In fact, next month, the blog with my story will be removed. In the meantime, any of Vin's kings searching for us might recognize the mythology of the Lost and Found, certain king names, camping in odd places, etc. This year, it was my turn. Using DC's approach, several men Vin kinged have stepped forth. Turns out, they were secretly seeking us, maintaining their own low profiles. DC knows what he's doing.

We even heard from men who declined Vin's invitation. A few begged us to put them in contact with Vin, but we will not. Since 2005, Vin no longer kings men. His website is down. The one gift we can give Vin in his current state is to protect him from the outside world.

Make no attempt to find Vin Vanbly. We will stop you.

Daniel, you asked me what happens to Lost Kings. I do not know. But there is a king who can answer your question. Find him.

King Perry

CHAPTER 3

Growing up, I always thought I could escape my life, becoming an astronaut or a cowboy. For a while, I convinced myself I could do both—work on a horse ranch between adventures to Mars. Kid shit. I never dreamed I'd be wealthy and unemployed. I'm sure it sounds great to people, the big American dream achieved.

It's not that great.

No one told me money is isolating. That my challenge in making friends would be compounded by money, and I would often mistrust those meager friendships I eventually made, once these friends eventually found out I have wealth. Consequently, I don't let anyone know this about me.

I live in a comfortable two-bedroom apartment in a nice, older brick building. It's got a cool built-in hutch. I could have bought a big house and paid cash, but I thought I might make more friends in an apartment building. A lifetime spent watching NBC sitcoms influenced me, I guess. It hasn't worked out that way; maybe I live in the wrong time slot.

When I first moved in, I would hear keys jingling in the hallway and invent an excuse to leave my apartment, trying to initiate a cheerful hello. I thought maybe we would strike a conversation, which might lead to some laughs and the mutual suggestion we should order a pizza sometime and hang out. Real casual. I didn't care if my neighbor was gay or straight, single or married. I just wanted to make jokes about the funky carpet by the back door, and the crappy dryers in our basement. But hallway conversations never happened. We passed each other with a grim nod. I don't have very good social skills. After each hallway non-encounter, I would

go to the lobby and pretend to check my mailbox, which I knew was empty. But hey, that took a good twenty minutes and I wasn't doing anything anyway.

I don't know what to do with my life.

There are only so many books you can read, so many movies you can watch. I tried online gaming and I stuck with World of Warcraft for a few months, but online friendships made me hunger for real ones. I constantly debate getting a job to meet people through work. But with my political science degree, I'm not sure what I'm qualified to do.

I'm not a religious guy. I don't want to shave my head and join a cult. I want to do something that matters in life, so my presence on the planet is not this big waste. I want something I can't quite taste. What must I do to meet my real life, the one where I vacation in Mexico, snorkeling with my boyfriend, my true love, and when we come home, we're still in love? I fantasize our voicemail is maxed out with messages from friends who missed us.

Wow. Pathetic.

I guess these self-pitying reflections are my way of admitting I am a Lost King.

I suppose I want to believe someone "out there" believes I am powerful and desperately needed. That I am...essential. Even at thirty-six, I'm still bamboozled by kid fantasies, astronaut, cowboy, and a now, a king.

I'm an idiot.

For hours, I've stared at Perry Mangin's photos. He's more handsome than I originally gave credit, his fiery-blue eyes, perfect smile. Digging through archives, I found a photo of him shirtless. He's ripped. I'm so tired of A-gays and their perfect fucking lives. These urban legends never happen to ordinary people, noses too big or eyebrows that can't be fixed with a good

tweezing. Men who shop at stores like J.C. Penny or Walmart. Perry was a stud before he met Vin and after a weekend of frolicking adventures in San Francisco, he became a stud king.

At first, Perry's email gave me hope, but hope is fleeting. I thought clues in his email would help me find another king. Google shows 63,000,000 links for the "VV" or "The VV." Super. Wikipedia has thirty-nine possible definitions for this abbreviation, including Volvo, varicose veins, and a WWE wrestler named Val Venis.

Googling "VV kings," reduces search results to only 1,000,000. The first link is for a Myspace page whose opening quote is "the blood of kings and queens run through my veins." The background for his page is an enormous marijuana leaf. Obviously, this isn't Vin Vanbly. Fuck.

Perry warned me not to contact him again; I'm supposed to find the king on my own. So there's no point to digging deeper into his past. Why give me "The VV" as a clue if there are no leads? How the hell do I find the man Perry suggested?

I suddenly realize I know the name of another Found King, one who left a comment on the blog. King Mai the Curious.

I Google him, and after about fifty useless, nowhere links, I strike a solid lead. A woman who bought an art history book on e-Bay came in contact with "King Mai" a few years ago. She wrote about it on her blog. The post is six years old.

"Get this," she wrote, "not only did he send the book I purchased in flawless condition, but he sent an equally expensive companion book! This second book is worth \$200! He just included it! For free! I emailed and asked him if it were a mistake and he said, 'No, it's a gift from King Mai the Curious.' How amazing and fantastic is that?! People are awesome!"

Her dubious use of exclamation points notwithstanding, I'm excited. This is him. I know it. I email her a few compliments on her blog design and explain I wish to contact King Mai. Would she be willing to either share his contact information, or, tell him, please, someone seeks him? I have learned my lesson about lying to people online, people who I may want to meet.

"Please," I type right above my name. "This is very important to me."

If she never responds, I will have to accept it. I already know I'm not going to get anywhere through trickery. I tried that. The Found Kings don't work like that.

She does not reply.

I shouldn't stare at the computer. She won't reply this quickly.

Nevertheless, I click Send and Receive.

Click it again.

I'm not as patient as I like to believe, because after five days of fruitless interent searching and checking my email every twenty minutes, I find myself composing a second email, begging her to *please* consider forwarding my request to King Mai. While still debating whether to send a second email, her reply appears, proving conclusively that obsessive clicking Send/Receive really does work.

"Oopsie, sorry for the delay," she cheerfully responds. "I was on vacation!"

She politely explains after writing a gushy thank-you note, King Mai directed her toward several art history websites he thought may be of interest. She said she never received an answer for his generosity, he deflected her questions. She looked through her email address book and found he had been deleted; she is a ruthless housekeeper, and their meager correspondence was several operating systems ago. However, she recalled his package arrived from a Chicago suburb, she remembered that much. During their short email correspondence, they discovered shared interests in organic gardening and the poet Rumi.

“Sorry and good luck!!”

After reading her last sentence, I compose a gracious thank you, because it seems that’s what a king would do and I am trying to, well, become one. There’s no point in lying to myself anymore. I don’t want to be a Lost King anymore.

Gardening. Chicago. Rumi.

Where are you, King Mai?

Oh.

Perhaps I’ve been approaching this wrong. Instead of looking for existing links, I could put something out there. That might work. It suddenly strikes me how ridiculous this is, searching for one specific guy without knowing his real name. Or where he lives. Or what he does. All I know is he’s a fairy tale king.

This might seem odd to me if I hadn’t already slayed a dragon in the World of Warcraft with three allies, a 12-year-old warrior girl from Dubai, a magician warlord from Kentucky, and a shy goblin, possibly from Wales. The goblin wielded a talking mace. We live in strange times. So, I will hunt down a mysterious king online. Maybe I will have to slay a dragon along the way.

Where do I go to find a king? I need that anything-goes bar in Star Wars where Luke and Obi Wan Kenobi seek information and transport. Not a lot of places like that here in Columbus, Ohio.

Yet the answer is obvious immediately—the one place on the internet where anything can be bought and sold, rented, exchanged, donated, where everything is lost and found, most of all, relationships. Dates, fuck buddies, escorts. It's all on Craigslist. It's the world's biggest swap meet when trying to sell an old elliptical machine or entice someone to pick up your free couch. It's not always a fun and friendly place. I placed ads on craigslist and heard from some creepy men. Online scams, and a few years ago, a Craigslist killer. Ha. Minus the alien band playing on stage, it's just like that bar in Star Wars.

There's no guarantee King Mai will see a craigslist ad. Actually, I have no real reason to suspect he will see it. But if those two letters, VV, are truly a code...maybe someone sees it who knows someone, who knows someone. It's a long shot, but a craigslist ad might work as a beacon.

The few times I tried to meet a guy through craigslist, I received replies from Portland, Florida, and everywhere, because some men search craigslist nationwide looking for guys like me. I'm a huge turn-on to some guys with kinky fetishes, which immediately turns me off to them. I had hoped to find a man into *me*, not my legs. While I have never experienced success on craigslist, I understand its reach. If anyone from The VV happens to search Chicago area craigslist ads...they'll find this one.

I hope.

It could happen.

I can't believe it took me a full two days to craft my ad. I wrote long paragraphs, detailed explanations, alternating between humble and clever, unconsciously making veiled threats until I recognized the sinister undertone. I deleted everything. Rewrote it. Deleted that as well. Also, I had to factor into consideration craigslist haters. If they don't like my post, they'll flag it. I think the best strategy is to keep it brief.

Message for The VV

King Mai, a supplicant requests an audience. Most curiously, a LK.

The first time I post, I feel panic and hope, like a lonely kid who just communicated a secret code by short wave radio, whispering, "Anybody listening?" I spend the next three hours staring at my Inbox, clicking Send/Receive. Waiting. Waiting. My heart skips with each received reply. I thrill in reading each one and, seconds later, am immensely disappointed by each crackpot response.

Thinking this through, I realize I need to post more than once. I can't assume they'll see the one ad. I may need to post this regularly, for a week? Two? Three? I create alternate email addresses and decide to publish on Craigslist four times a day. No, twice a day. I've got to stay under the flaggers' radar.

For the next couple of days, my two-times-a-day posting seems to work. I get more junk replies, a few mildly encouraging, but mostly crap. A few emails excite me, promising, “It’s me, King Mai.” The most convincing reply was so believable I typed a reply before noticing the email address was cumdumpster12@gmail.com.

Something tells me he’s not King Mai.

On the fourth day, the ad gets flagged, deleted. I hold my breath. Once Craigslist haters decide they hate your ad, it’s over. Everything seems okay by my evening posting; it stays. That night, I convince myself to quit posting for two full days, so my ad doesn’t seem quite so methodical. Flaggers hate regular posters.

During the second week, trouble begins. One response screams in all caps, “WHAT THE FUCK IS YOUR PROBLEM?”

Uh-oh. Hater.

The headline of the next reply reads, DEAR DICKHEAD. The body of the email isn’t much kinder. *Quit posting your goddamn stupid post!* The next time I post, my ad doesn’t last a full fifteen minutes before flagged to death.

A battle ensues.

I post a nine hours later, from a different email address and in a different Craigslist section, yet they find and flag my ad. Damn it. I skip posting my nighttime ad, hoping to throw

them off my track, but they circle like vultures the next morning, dive-bombing and screeching until my ad is yanked in less than five minutes. I quit posting for a few days and then repost under yet another category, but they pounce immediately. I'm losing the war.

I received dozens of email responses in the past two weeks and very few felt promising. I now have eight of those "It's me, King Mai" responses. A dozen similar ones asking, "Why do you keep posting this?" I hate those. They make me feel self-conscious. Why *am* I posting this? A handful of quirky responses make me think they clicked the wrong link and responded anyway. No, lady, I will not pretend to breastfeed with you. Sheesh.

At the beginning of week three, when my post no longer survives more than two minutes, I receive a reply which reads, *Dear Asshole, I flagged your sorry ass four years ago in Seattle and I flag you again, mutherfucker. I will be around to block your VV idiocy the next time, too. Stupid, fake posts! ASSHOLE!*

Four years ago? I wasn't looking for The VV four years ago.

But somebody was.

A chill races through me. I am not the only seeker of this tribe of Found Kings.

Who was it? Another Found King wondering if he might uncover king brothers? Or, was it someone like me, a person who caught a whiff of the urban legend, the tribe who call themselves The VV?

My fingers are trembling.

I laugh because it's the internet, just online bullshit. Still, I feel as though I have glanced down to the impressionable, soft earth, and discovered footprints ahead of me. I walk where others have tread. Maybe other VV chasers exist in other cities. Who else is looking? How many people know?

Words from Perry's post float through my brain. *Once there was a tribe of kings. Odd you may think, but these weren't those kind of kings...*

This is too fucking weird. I'm inventing conspiracies where there are none.

My craigslist campaign lasted two full weeks. If these VV guys are out there, they must know I'm looking. Right? Wouldn't Perry have told them? Why didn't someone reply? Why didn't King Mai the Curious reply?

Wait.

Wait a minute. What if he did?

They were all fake posts, though, none of them were real. Unless, perhaps, *perhaps* one of them was the real deal and I didn't catch it. What if one of the emails I deemed wacko or a copy-cat came from King Mai?

Oh.

My heart beats faster and I already know—know in my heart—they sent me a clue. I didn't see it because I expected an email from kingmaithecurious@obviously.com.

They sent something. *Something is here.*

I collect all the worthless, stupid replies, move them from Deleted emails to a new folder. I feel anxious, as if moving expensive glassware every time I drag another one. I may want to compare the send dates and times if I find no clues in the text itself. This feels crazy. I'm being crazy. Right?

I don't care. I have nothing to do anyway.

I print them all. I sit at my living room table creating categories, seeking patterns. I examine email addresses and search for puzzles hidden in the body of text. How many write

similar messages? Exact same words? It's beyond strange, this thing I'm doing, comparing phony, irritating craigslist responses.

I hate rereading the ones asking, "Why are you doing this?" I don't want to think about my stupid obsession. Many replies employ the word *curious*, but I can't see a pattern. The best fake response was written by cumdumpster12. I even look twice at the woman who wanted me to breastfeed. Clue? No, I don't think so.

Maybe I can't see it yet.

Wait—this is odd.

I received two emails from the same address. The first email sent reads, "Why are you doing this? I won't judge you..." Same crap as the others. My hands shake as I rifle through the miscellaneous stack until I find the second email. The response offered only a short sentence, *Hey bubba, tell me five things about yourself nobody knows.*

Clearly, a crackpot.

Or does this email full of curiosity, actually *demonstrating* curiosity? I remember now when this second email arrived from the same address as the first one, I barely read it before I clicked Delete.

I study the email address. Does this mean anything? Jimbo5amgday@hotmail.com Oh god. Yes, it does. The email address contains the letters *gday*, or "G'day," if you were from Australia where Perry lives. Is this a reference suggesting "I talked to Perry?" Why not? I have certainly created a new email address for a one-time use.

Given that, now, the *5am* strikes me as significant. 5:00 a.m. The dawn.

In the blog sharing Perry's story, Found Kings greet the dawn. It's, like, a thing. They wear glorious king shirts, something beautiful that helps them remember, and they raise their heads to the sun. I don't know what this accomplishes, but I guess it's special for them.

Since reading Perry's blog tale a few weeks ago, twice, I rose before dawn to go watch the sunrise. I thought it might inspire me. Once I watched from my building's roof. Sunrise was pretty. Colorful. Chilly for April. But did I feel like a king? Not really. I tried to think inspiring thoughts about life and believe good things about other people, but mostly I worried. If that roof door swung closed, nobody would have any clue I was trapped up there. I couldn't scurry down a fire escape without getting myself killed. I decided the dawn didn't inspire me because by the time I dragged myself through the roof door, I was sweating and exhausted.

A week later, I took an Uber to a city park to try again, a more beautiful environment. This time, I sat on a bench until the sun rose. Again, magnificent. Reds, oranges. Blue sky, eventually. I felt serenity to realize this happens daily. But kingly? I dunno. I'm not sure what I was supposed to feel. On the return trip, my Uber driver took one look at me and asked, "Jesus, what happened to you?" The serenity faded quickly.

Overall, the adventure me sad, another reminder I am a truly a Lost King.

The references to *g'day* and *5am* are not accidental. King Mai the Curious contacted me. I'm sure of it. The whole "Jimbo" part remains a mystery, probably there to bury the real message—*I talked to Perry. He vouched for you. If you're the kind of guy who notices small details, say hello.*

Am I crazy to think this? Isn't the second email demonstrating true curiosity? But why the first email from the same address, to sow doubt? Why not simply email me? As I ponder this

peculiar world of codes and puzzles, a wrinkle surfaces. He wants to know five things about me nobody else knows. That's a problem. I don't like to talk about myself.

It's kind of crazy, I know, because I blog. That's different. When I blog, I share my craziest moments (the ones I'm willing to admit to), my self-reflections (the ones I feel comfortable sharing), my outward persona. I am truthful in my feelings, outrages, and opinions. But many topics, I never visit. Nothing specific about my upbringing. My condition. Nothing my parents could use to find me. I've worked hard to hide my existence.

I shared my web address with the Forgive King. I have no doubt Perry forwarded it, which means Mai saw every story I already shared online. Crap.

Oh, hey. That's one of my five details—I don't like to talk about myself.

What else?

I try to remember interesting anecdotes, details, gems a curious king would find valuable. What does he want to know exactly? What is he looking for? A theme from King Perry's story flashes into mind—surrender. As I try to imagine details nobody knows, it's hard to avoid the elephant in the room. Perhaps to get found, I must reveal my true self. Now that the word *surrender* dances through my brain, five details emerge immediately. Individually, they don't reveal much, so I will use them.

1. I don't like to talk about myself.
2. I am wealthy, result of a large lawsuit settlement. Few people know this. I live simply.
3. I would love to sing and dance in a musical, but I never will.
4. Both of my parents are alive, but I haven't spoken to them since I was a teenager.

5. I invented an amazing recipe, gnocchi pasta with bacon and caramelized onions, a special dish I make it for myself regularly. But never for anyone else. The first person I will cook this gnocchi for is my husband, if I ever find one.

The last one makes me nervous, as it betrays a biggish secret. I am afraid a lifelong relationship will never happen for me. In fact, I'm sure of it. I've only been in love once and I think I romanticized him more than actually loved him. Eric.

Before I chicken out, I click Send.

Then, it hits me. Anger.

Those *fuckers*.

I can't believe I would play silly mind games with these shadowy internet figures. *Lost and Found Kings*. What fucking bullshit! I fucking told a total *stranger* I'm saving a pasta dish for an imaginary lover. I'm an idiot. I got engrossed in a crazy story, internet tag with fake participants. Assholes. What kind of putz am I?

I am shocked when a reply arrives within two hours.

The words read, "Pretty good, bubba. But what's *the big one*, the one you don't want to reveal? Don't fuck around, Mary, not this close to the finish line. Name it."

Mary?

I opened my heart and this anonymous asshole replies without a polite thank you—calling me *Mary*—and has the nerve to demand, "One more."

Fuck. That.

What big one? He's bluffing.

I'm done.

Fuck this. Fuck them.

As I lurch around the apartment, noisily banging pots, cleaning up from last night's pot roast, my angst and anger hopscotch each other. The big one. Please.

Remembering the tone of his email—calling me *bubba*—pisses me off and I let the weightlifting bar clatter hard onto its supports. Fuck them. The apartment feels small this afternoon, just me and that goddamn email, so I head to a popular part of town. I'll go be part of the crowds.

I buy a book at Barnes & Noble, sit in their café, reading. I'm so used to doing everything online, it feels foreign sitting in public. Are people staring? Maybe. I recall why I spend so much time alone in my apartment. I don't like people. I don't like being in public.

I could go somewhere private, like a vacation, but where? Do what? I could get on a plane to Aruba. I've never been, but it's where rich people are supposed to go play. I can't get around easily on sand, so maybe Aruba isn't such a great idea. Travel means airplanes and crowded airports, and unfamiliar terrain, all of which I desperately try to avoid. I don't know what to do with myself. How to spend my time. How to live. I could go buy something to make me feel, well, anything. Buy what? I don't need anything.

The longer I stare at my open book, the more I keep seeing nothing in front of me.

Nothing.

I'm tired of a futureless future. I'm tired of being alone. I'm also tired of holding back and not talking about this shit. I mean, yeah, I talk to Margaret, but your therapist doesn't count. I love her, but she's not my friend. Why won't I ever just admit it? I've never blogged about it. Never discussed it with a Facebook friend. No wonder I'm a Lost King.

In the original blog post, the Human Ghost had whispered to Perry that the lack of forgiveness is what kept the Lost Kings lost. Perry forgave me. So, what's missing? Maybe what I need now, is curiosity.

I'm going home.

When I get to my computer, my reply is a little snarky. Vulnerability or submission, whatever this is, does not come easily.

Okay, King Mai, here's the big one. Growing up, my father beat the crap out of me so regularly, so viciously, he considered it a relaxing hobby. When I was sixteen, he permanently shattered my legs by backing the station wagon over me. Twice. Surgeries could only fix so much. Since the surgeries, almost eighteen years, I use metal canes strapped to my arms to drag myself around. In the street, people pity me and look away, sorry for my pathetic, awkward slogging. Children point at me; their parents scold them not to stare. Is that good enough for the *big one*? Did I pass?

I sneer as I click Send.

I storm around my living room, imagining furious conversation with this asshole, King Mai. Are you satisfied? Is your curiosity satisfied? You think you won something because I caved? Well, congratulations. You should know I am strong. I don't take pity well. Remarkably

unwell, in fact. So, if any condescending tone, any—*I'm so sorry*—in your reply, you asshole king, then I quit this lame-ass quest for an answer, and this time, I'm not kidding.

VV *assholes!* You fucking assholes.

I grow weary of ranting. It tires me.

I spend far too much time ranting to myself.

I bet Mai is plucked and pretty, a sexy, party boy having great sex with the elite of Gaydom. These kings roam the world to explore exotic circuit parties, partying, laughing, and it's awesome. I bet Mai never gets depressed, thinks about how he can never be an astronaut or cowboy, or equally impossible for me, walk into a gay bar and men don't avert their eyes.

Asshole.

I buzz around my place, more enraged for the lack of reply. When it comes, if it comes, if there's one fucking drop of pity, I will...I don't know. Many imaginary threats follow.

When the reply finally shows, I find literally nothing for me to analyze or criticize, just a phone number, area code 815, which I discover online is rural Illinois, not a Chicago suburb.

Ten minutes later, I dial the number.

“Hello, Mr. Lost King,” says a light voice. “This is a temporary cell phone number and voicemail, which I will discard after we speak. I suggest we talk on Thursday at 2 p.m. Clear three hours on your calendar. If this day and time don't work, leave a message and suggest

another. I'll update voicemail with a confirmation. Otherwise, call at the appointed time. Oh, and have a great day."

I feel nervous leaving a message. Why do I feel nervous?

"Thursday at 2 p.m. is fine." I focus on not letting my voice shake. "Talk to you then."

I hang up.

I'm an idiot for being nervous. That's stupid. He can't do anything to me.

He already has.

But seriously? Why the high drama? That's the first thing I'm going to ask.

"Oh, that. Sorry," Mai says, "I know, it's unusual, the secrecy. You meet guys over the internet much? Some real whack jobs out there."

"Yeah," I say in stunned surprise. "I put a few ads out there. Had a profile online once."

As Mai chats about challenges in online dating, it's...normal. He's just this guy on the phone. His voice isn't sinister and foreboding. It's like when you call your Visa card and get that one friendly, customer service representative who isn't monotone and you think, *Hey, a real person.*

"By the way, I'm Mai Kearns. What's your name?"

"I'm surprised you don't already know."

My voice comes out sharper than I intended. He didn't explain the secrecy. He sidestepped it. I believe they owe me some answers.

Mai says, “Of course I know your name, bubba. I just wanted to hear how you’d introduce yourself.”

“I see.”

I knew it. *Mind games*. I’m not falling for it.

“We know who you are, Daniel. Everyone in The VV has been alerted you’re questing. I met the other kings only a few weeks ago, after I posted my comment on the blog, but they explained how this works. Every couple of years, someone accidentally discovers the Lost and Founds story and wants to know if it’s real. The kings call it ‘questing.’ Isn’t that funny?”

“Is it? Is the story real?”

“Which brings us to our next conversation topic. You have to choose.” After a brief pause, he continues. “I asked you to tell me five things—”

“Six.”

I’m pissed. I’m supposed to feel gratitude, but I don’t. I’m not sure why. I’m always feeling the wrong thing.

“Six things, bubba” Mai says, “Now it’s your turn. Ask me six questions about my life, The VV, anything. Ask why The VV make themselves difficult to find. Ask how many men Vin kinged. Or, ask how many kings live near Columbus, Ohio.”

I flinch, knowing he knows where I live. I’ve taken such pains to hide from my parents. My apartment lease is under an imaginary roommate. My money, the lawsuit money, protects me from being found by reporters, old family friends, and most importantly, him. But this king knows where I live.

“Ask about Vin and what happened to him in 2005. Ask me the same thing you did Perry, ‘What happens to Lost Kings?’ Honestly, the answer won’t mean much without hearing the story

of my King Weekend. It would be like discovering an answer is ‘thirteen,’ and only then realizing you didn’t phrase the question correctly. Your call, Daniel. Six life and VV questions to satisfy your immediate curiosity, or all six questions get rolled into one and I tell the story of my King Weekend, which will further your quest. But when I finish, no more questions. Not a single one.”

“Why make me choose?”

“I take it you’re going with Option A and using one of your six questions?”

“No. Don’t answer. Gimme a second.”

To learn anything useful, I need to hear King Mai’s story. That’s what I need to choose, I guess. I’m not disappointed, not exactly. There was a price and I had hoped to coast along for free.

“Please.” I hope my voice doesn’t sound disappointed. “Tell me about your weekend with Vin.”

“You got it.”

He pauses.

Fine. He got me.

“Daniel, Do you have any idea how bad the farm crisis was in the 1990s? Real bad. Many of us farmers were lost.”

CHAPTER 4

I can't believe his story. I can't.

The "King of Curiosity" spun his tale for hours, describing every thought and feeling, the fury inside him transformed into something miraculous. That part terrified me. I know anger. I know anger on a daily basis. I couldn't let go of it, like Mai did. It defines me.

I don't understand what happened. I mean, sure, I understood the words, yet a thrill passes through my brain, a stubborn tickle like a warning light flashing, "Does Not Compute." Vin Vanbly orchestrated all these events, spent a month in Mai's town and bought Mai a farm? Manipulated former high school classmates into revealing sad stories, and now they're Mai's extended family? This doesn't make any sense. How can this happen in the world?

He's lying. He has to be.

Mai says, "Right before we parted Vin offered me three options, the chance to hear a story about his life before he was twenty-one. It's not my place to repeat his story to you, a stranger. Short version, after a full weekend discussing curiosity, he revealed my kingship in an entirely new perspective. I bawled my fucking eyes out."

He is quiet.

My heart pounds.

Finally, Mai says, “Somehow, after Vin’s terrible childhood tale, we fucked around one more time. Sure, it was a little twisted, but that’s Vin. We were so in love all weekend, and this story made me love him more. After I stopped crying, we had jackoff contest. Sorta.”

He chuckles, a short guffaw that could work itself into a real laugh. It doesn’t.

“Vin had a great cock. I coulda sucked that beauty for hours. Assuming, fucking scarecrows weren’t attacking me.”

As Mai reveals the final story about Jimbo and A Curious Army, I find myself distracted, wondering about Mai himself. He won’t tell me Vin’s childhood story, but he’s got no problem describing graphic sex between him and Vin. I blush to remember—I got hard a few times during this afternoon’s tale. I wonder if he described every minute detail to titillate me. No, that’s crazy.

Maybe.

I don’t know.

I feel lightheaded; our entire conversation made me dizzy and my mouth is dry. I try to focus on his voice. Mai’s cadence is easy, relaxed. He betrays no reluctance or distance, spilling his tale as if we were best buds. He cried twice, once when he tried to articulate what happened to his heart when he witnessed the Butterfly Tree. I teared up, too, because of the sheer rawness he managed to communicate—his surprise at being loved so generously. I understood it well, or rather, I *would* understand the surprise of being loved, if someone actually loved me.

I hate how self-pitying that sounds, but fuck it. Nobody even knows I’m alive.

Stop it. Stop thinking like that.

A few sentences later Mai concludes the tale by insisting I would not *believe* how hard Vin shot his load. I’m not sure what to say, so I keep quiet.

“A minute later, I come bouncing out of the cornfield, right? Totally scare the *shit* out of Randy and Jen, and also my mom. They all jump back. Which made me laugh because they had been screaming at me to *get out here* and when I burst out, they’re surprised. My mom had a knife and I was like, ‘What the hell are you doing?’ She said she was slicing bread when Randy and his wife arrived but one glance at Randy, and knew she was lying. I started laughing. I mean, laughing hard. My mom was going to attack Vin with a bread knife. Craziiness, man.”

Mai laughs.

I smile.

“In her defense, Saturday morning, twenty-five high schoolers showed up 6:30 a.m., announcing they needed to assemble a Butterfly Tree in her yard, during which time she discovers the stranger on a date with her son is a world-class liar. She keeps it cool, expecting to meet Vin and talk about these lies. Instead, he and I run corn. Then, we escape in his pickup truck while she chases us. Later the same day, she gets a phone call from an acquaintance in town, Mrs. Fee, alerting her me and my ‘life coach’ ran through her corn field. After her freaking out all Saturday night with no news, Randy and his wife appear Sunday noon, freaking her with mysterious references to ‘things that happened during the night’ but he won’t explain more. Poor Mom. For the next few years, whenever anything mildly exciting happened on the farm, I’d yell, ‘*Grab the bread knife.*’ She would get mad, but I’d laugh my ass off.”

I laugh. I feel giddy.

When he recovers, he says, “I kept my promise. For thirteen years, I never researched The VV or any men Vin kinged. I forced myself to quit AOL so I wouldn’t be tempted. A year ago I began searching for the others.”

Hang on—thirteen years after 1996 would be 2010. Three years ago. Why did he wait?

Casually, he says, “Funny thing is, I didn’t know they’d be so damn difficult to find. When I started searching, their complete absence of an online presence felt mighty peculiar. Back in 1995 and 1996, there was a chat room on AOL. Guys were writing posts, saying, ‘You wouldn’t believe what happened to me...’ Where did they go? When I could find no trace, I realized they had deliberately gone underground. Instinctively, I got more cautious. I knew we’d find each other eventually, but right then I realized it could take a while.”

What’s with the ridiculous secrecy?

“When I found the blog about Perry, I still was skeptical, despite seeing his king name. Once I saw the words, ‘the Human Ghost,’ my heart finally accepted this was legit. I immediately thought of Vin’s story he told me before we parted. I think maybe his whole life, Vin Vanbly has been a human ghost. Hell, half the weekend we spent together, I never saw him, just heard his voice from the row next to mine as I ran corn. Some August days, I run the corn, hoping I hear him dancing in the row next to mine. I know that’s twisted, but I find the idea comforting.”

I am speechless.

There is a long silence.

Long.

“Uh...the end.”

I can’t seem to speak.

“You still there?”

“Yes.”

My voice is gravel.

What story did Vin tell Mai? Why did it make Mai cry? The VV secrecy—what are they doing? What about the Sunday party Vin promised? Did Mai invite the bubbas? Of course, he did. Right? How could a garage mechanic buy a farm mortgage and then have people in town agree to this crazy fucking shit? What did Mai tell his parents? How did they react? Did Mai Kearns ever fall in love again? Did he find his true love?

What happens to lost kings?

My god.

I can't ask any questions.

He forced me agree to his no-questions condition. He told his tale in such a way—oh my god, he fucked me good. I cannot fucking believe this. If I ask anything, say something snarky, argue or try to trick him into revealing more, Mai will tell the other Found Kings not to help me because I don't play by the rules. A dozen more questions rush through my mind. But I can't ask anything.

I can't breathe.

This curiosity will kill me.

In his unique, lilting tone, Mai Kearns asks, "Anything you'd like to say?"

More questions race through my mind, each one pushing and shoving to get to the front. I just got punched in the jaw with bubba love.

"Yo, Daniel," Mai says. "Say something."

What will I say?

"Thank you."

The strength in my words surprises me.

I will accept this story, holes and all. I will accept my unanswered questions. I will stay curious.

“Thank you, King Mai. For the gift of curiosity.”

He laughs.

I laugh, too. Kind of cool, as I consider this. I’m going to take a page from the story I was told and surrender. I will grow my curiosity in the world.

That feels good.

Mai says, “You did good. I wasn’t confident you’d resist asking one.”

I stay silent, pondering him, pondering me, our strange phone conversation this afternoon. My eyes well up with tears. *Curiosity*. I don’t know what to think of any of this. I can’t think. My skin is tingling. My brain is tingling.

“As a reward,” he says, “You get one question answered. Call this a king’s blessing before parting. Think carefully. Choose wisely.”

I wipe my eyes.

Do I ask what *happens to lost kings*? Is that what I truly want to know? Do I want to ask how to not stay a lost king? Or, do I ask him how to find Vin? He won’t answer that. Or, is boldness and risk-taking rewarded? Perry said The VV protects Vin “in his current condition,” so maybe they won’t answer anything directly. Is he in a coma? I can’t think. I don’t know what to do.

Mai says, “Hey man, take your time. Hurry up, though, because I promised to make pancakes for dinner tonight and mom likes to eat by six p.m. I gotta hustle.”

As three dozen relevant questions ping pong around my brain, one already feels right, it fits, though I’m not sure why.

“Who is—wait! Don’t answer. I’m going to rephrase.”

My heart thuds against my chest. Carefully, like wielding a knife, I carve out the intentional words. “What is the next step on my quest?”

He chuckles. “Good question, bubba. I thought you might ask something stupid, like, ‘What’s Vin’s home phone number.’ Which you gotta know, I was ready to answer truthfully without giving the real digits.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

I passed the test.

I passed the test.

I knew they were testing me. But, holy shit, *they’re testing me.*

He says, “You won’t meet any more kings over the internet.”

I don’t know why this also stuns me, but it does. I experienced surprise after surprise all afternoon, what’s one more? How do I find the next king?

“Hey, mind if I start mixing flour and eggs and stuff while we finish? I have a few other dishes to prepare. Mom is on a schedule.”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

This king makes pancakes for his mom. He’s not one of the A-list, like Perry. He’s still a small-town farmer. Maybe his life didn’t change.

“Tonight’s pancake includes blueberries,” Mai says in a light tone.

Maybe I made a bigger deal of this king thing than it warrants. Maybe Perry was the exception in terms of changing his life. But all afternoon, it sure seemed life-changing for Mai. I heard it in his voice. Didn’t I?

Mai says, “No more internet. We’re the ones who flagged you. We’ll stop future Craigslist postings, too, any city. Starting now, we flag your first post.”

“Oh.” I suck in a deep breath. “Who?”

“The VV. We will shut you down, bubba.”

I am struck dumb, but familiar anger streaks through me, giving me words.

“Back to cloak and dagger?”

“Yeah. But nothing creepy or illegal. No one’s going to break into your home or chase you into a car wreck. Found Kings don’t work like that.”

“Is that so. How does it work?”

I’m pissed.

“Ah, a very different question with a very satisfying answer. Boog could answer that as well as some of the other guys in The VV. Oh man, there are some very interesting kings living interesting lives. After all, Vin started when he was twenty-two. That’s a whole lot of king energy he put into the world.”

How many?

He chuckles. “If you’re still curious, we’ll open doors. Pay attention. Look for signs. Daniel, you have to put some skin in the game. Show us you’re ready to find the next one and do the real work. Thanks to your email, we now know you’re wealthy, so nobody’s going to FedEx you plane tickets. Do your homework and pack your bags.”

Pack my bags?

“Oh my god,” Mai says with excitement. “I used a sports metaphor! That skin in the game thing? How butch am I, Mary?”

He laughs, and it’s true—he sounds like a woodpecker.

I know it's a question, but I have to say something. "Just to confirm. The VV won't drain my bank accounts, right?"

"Right. If you're not interested anymore, drop it. Have a good life. Nobody wishes you harm." Mai's voice moves away from the phone receiver. "Hey. Would you grab that? Thanks."

Who's there? A lover? Is his mom in the kitchen? Everything feels important right now, remembering all these details. I take deep breaths examine my right hand. Still feels tingly.

"I'm sorry," I say, interrupting his last comment. "Could you repeat the last part? My mind was racing and I didn't quite hear it."

"I will, but hang on. Gotta mix something real quick."

I hear a whirring come to life, something mechanical. Blender.

So many delicate questions tease me. He touches every phrase or word so lightly, makes it...I don't know. I can't define this, this tantalizing sensation crawling over my skin. All afternoon, wonders, soft revelations, strange little prizes unwrapped, and still obscured from sight, what does it mean, what does it all mean? The hallucinations he described when the corn flew by—each delicate detail, all intentional. Is this king energy?

What is he doing to me?

He says, "I'm going to throw in some blueberries. Good harvest from last year. Trick is to freeze them with lime juice. So delicious."

I'm on speaker phone now.

What's happening? A pancake-mixing king is sending me on a quest, daring me to find the next king. Why does this feel so, so, sparkling? I think, I think he's been pouring king energy into me for hours now. Am I crazy to think this? Why am I so close to tears?

I hear the click and he speaks directly into my ear. “Sorry, I had to mix in a protein powder and you can’t just stir the stuff in. We eat breakfast foods for dinner now, all the time. My mom has Alzheimer’s and these days mealtime is always breakfast. She doesn’t remember she loves eggs, so I have to sneak protein in her pancake.”

I shake my head.

“The protein power isn’t as bad as you’d think,” he says, as if he sees me. “With fresh fruit, you don’t notice the taste. Not much.”

I don’t know what to say.

“Oh.”

Mai says, “I had been saying, I did not immediately search for other kings. My curiosity had kept me close to Vin. I didn’t want to lose it. Especially after what happened to Vin in 2005.”

What happened to Vin?

“While searching, I decided to keep a low profile, like they did, until I understood more of the situation. Unlike you, I did not stumble across that blogger by accident. Last year, I developed complex search algorithms scouring the web for Lost and Finds references. The day I posted my comment on the blog, they emailed me within hours to confirm I was one of Vin’s men. Perry called me an hour later. First words out of his mouth were, ‘It’s really you.’ Over the years, kings had compared stories and decided the King of Curiosity was a real person. They didn’t know my name, but they knew I existed. Their policy is to not to actively search for other Found Kings. There are intriguing reasons for not doing so. But they knew I was out there. Somewhere.”

Why is my heart pounding?

“About eight hours later, same day, I hear car doors slam. I leave my barn expecting to see Jamie or Randy. Instead, I discovered three men in sparkling shirts. We stared at each other. It was...intense. Three hours later, two more kings showed. Six more kings flew into O’Hare the next day. The king known as DC told everyone about me. Those first two weeks were insane. I never dreamed it would be like this.”

“Like what?”

Oops. I couldn’t stop myself.

“Like...” Mai’s voice tightens. He clears his throat. “Like my sudden presence was the best thing that ever happened to them. They were waiting for me. They’re all amazing. Perry is like, wow. We’ve Skyped a half dozen times already and we’re planning my first trip to Perth. I gotta hear his cello. You’ve researched him, right? I had never even heard of the Bolinas Project. Twelve European cities adopted his approach to addressing the homeless situation. The Bolinas Project is only one of his. Not just Perry, either. You wouldn’t believe what these guys are doing. They’re influencing things.”

I can’t help it. Tears stream down my face. He sounds happy. I don’t know if I’m jealous or happy for him.

“Anyway,” Mai says, laughing.

I hear tell-tale wet-mucus noises, a snort, his voice muffled.

“If you want validation my story is real, Google me when we get off the phone. It’s cool. Kearns with a *k*. I think you’re smart enough not to contact me again. Your audience was for today only, and now it’s done.”

“Wait—you didn’t answer my one question!”

King Mai the Curious says, “I sure did, bubba. Hope you were listening.”

With a soft click, he is gone.

“Wait! Hello? Mai?”

He’s gone.

Dazzled and exhausted, I feel I should rest. I stare at the phone in my hand. My brain hurts. Should I call back?

No.

I don’t—I don’t know what he said, the clue. He’s done with me, that’s obvious.

Rest later. I’ll go online, like he suggested.

It’s not hard to find information about Mai Kearns in DeKalb, Illinois. Not hard at all, in fact, if you’re regularly featured in magazine articles and a dozen farming blogs. His farm’s website has twenty seven separate pages. Last year at their GLBTQ Prom, all six male chaperones wore matching tuxedos and John Deere caps. They are pictured, laughing, arms around each other’s shoulders. Only one has brown skin, so he must be Mai. He’s ordinary, but handsome, too. Short black hair, gray temples, always sexy. Actually, I was wrong. He’s not ordinary. He’s hot.

In another picture, Randy Phinter places a crown on the gay prom king’s head. When he described Randy chasing Vin into the corn, Mai said it was odd to see Randy’s corpulent frame running full-speed. This Randy is a total stud, broad shoulders and a tight build. Even in a tuxedo he looks strong. All those years playing Corn Tag paid off, I guess.

On the Kearns’ farm website, people are encouraged to apply for a three-month, six-month, or year-long internship on any of six farms, depending on their interest. Farming. Chemistry. Project management. Education. At the bottom of Mai’s application is a single sentence in 9-point font, so tiny a person may not even notice. *All curious are welcome.*

I switch gears to read a Chicago news magazine's feature, dated last year. A spotlight, not even the focus of the article, describes how Mai cares for his mother, promenading her daily through a half-acre of gardens, picking flowers and introducing her to interns, usually the exact same students every day. While she may not remember, every day is rich with new friends, vegetables, evening strolls. A photo, taken from behind, shows her leaning on him. He points at a tree alive with monarchs, orange and black fluttering everywhere. Looking closely, I see watermelon chunks hanging in the tree. It's all true. The image sears into memory.

These real focus of the news article is the bubbas. In 1997, Mai and the Bubbas wondered what might happen if linked six farms economically, while leaving full, autonomous control to the original families who owned them. They called their gambit "the six pack" and it succeeded. Another six pack established itself closer to Rockford, Illinois, graduates of DeKalb's 4H program. The Bubbas mentor the Rockford Six Pack and two others, one in Iowa and in Wisconsin. Small town farmers have a fighting chance again, if you trust your best friends to work the land with you. Scholarships. Internships. Their own curriculum for growing organic food. Chemistry classes. Photo of a sixteen-year-old arguing crop rotation strategies before a small crowd.

It's a fucking university.

Mai couldn't become a college professor, because even five miles away, Northern Illinois University was too far. So, he created a university on his farm. He's leading an army of farmers, reimagining America's bread basket, a battle where farmers win. Everybody wins.

I barely read any financial links associated with Perry. I only read about his personal life. I mean, he was an Australian ranch husband, mostly. He lives nowhere. My brain buzzes to Mai's offhanded reference. The Bolinas Project.

They're changing the world.

I lunge for a piece of paper, the back of an envelope within grasp, and start scribbling anything I recall from the last ten minutes of our conversation. Did he emphasize the number of visiting kings the first night? Perry and Mai skyped six times already. Six? A clue? This isn't big enough. When it's full, I rummage through a drawer until I find a clean sheet and scribble my hurried notes. Mai answered my question, he must have. He told me to Google his farm. His suggestion. Did he post a clue on his website? Later. I'll go back to it later.

I jot impressions on tone, word choice, and any particular emphasis I recollect. King names from his fairy tale. He deliberately told me Vin used real names in the Lost and Founds. A clue? How does Jimbo the Bruiser fit? Clue?

When this intensity spells itself, I am surprised to discover three full pages and one electric bill envelope covered in ink, my frenzy yielding nothing but mad ramblings. What do I know? What are the facts? But maybe these are not facts. Would Kearns lie while giving me clues, if it helped me grow my heart? Vin lied to Mai all weekend. Maybe these so-called facts need to be re-examined.

I lay out the papers, side by side, riddles before me, taunting me. Who is the next king? In the margins, I drew four ears of corn. Didn't seven kings visit him the first day? First three, then four more? Five? I don't remember! Everything swirls, words spinning, clues sparking alive like maybe they did for Mai when he raced through a midnight cornfield wearing only a green-glowing jockstrap, a ghost at his side.

Breathe, I tell myself. *Breathe.*

Here's one fact I do know—they're watching me. They know I am questing.

A shiver races up my spine. Involuntarily, I jerk my head back, straight up. Through the ceiling, through the roof, I imagine I see the blue sky, maybe a few cloud wisps, and a circling brown speck swoops lower, a hawk, perhaps named Kalista, maintaining a watchful eye.

I think I just joined an army.

CHAPTER 5

I hate New York.

The city scares me, the sheer weight of it. I've never stayed in a city where I worried about the strength of the earth to keep everything in place. How can the ground sustain so much pressure? Skyscraper after skyscraper, each scraping its neighbor, rocketing skyward. Bulk cement everywhere, colossal theaters, and public buildings impressive enough to make Washington D.C. wince. Thousands and thousands eating and rushing and pushing it all lower, the billion katrillion footsteps tromping and stomping through a city sprawling and overweight for two hundred years.

I'm terrified.

The traffic is the worst. Uncountable cars, their presence too numerous to register, flying by me every damn day. Every single one reminds me of the station wagon. I hate it. Margaret was surprised as hell when I announced my New York visit, even more surprised I wouldn't explain why. How can I explain I'm chasing a butterfly to New York City, based on a fairy tale and a picture of a farmer pointing into a tree? She'll have me committed.

Cars, cars, cars, cars. Everywhere, the station wagon backs over me. I try not to dwell on the milliseconds when every sensation merged into raw white, a place beyond pain, nameless. I

will spend every second of my life remembering that sound, my leg bones splintering. My world changed. I died under that weight. Emerged as this freak.

Three exhausting, impossible weeks with nothing to show.

The never-ending horror of people and steel and cars and people and steel and cars and cars and cars and cars and people...I can't breathe in this goddamn city. I try not to be traumatized by each car screech, but I am on fucking edge. All the time. My nerves are frayed raw. I can't take much more.

Calm down. Quit trembling.

I'm fine. I'm sitting here, sipping cold coffee, no danger.

Think good things.

Street food. My suite is beautiful. Subway riders who go out of their way to make me feel okay, like it's no inconvenience I occupy three spots where others could stand. Some people offer me their seats, and that's nice, I guess. Of course, nobody wants to navigate around the crippled guy while making a speedy exit, so it's probably self-serving. My first week, an older black lady asked me to peel her orange. She didn't give one flying fuck about my legs. She offered me a slice, continuing to recite her life story until the train squealed into her stop. She took her orange and joined the frenzy demanding out. No thank you, no goodbye. She saw me as an orange peeler, not a cripple. Hell, she didn't even see me as a person. God, you know your life is pathetic when you treasure an anonymous subway interaction.

The automatic reaction to my legs is for people to crumple their faces in pity, communicating, "I understand." I want to yell back, "You fucking don't, or you'd know I'm goddamn sick of pity." I want people to accommodate me on the sidewalks and in subways, but I don't want them to make eye contact, or if they do, I want them to look bored and frustrated, like

everyone else. I'm insane. Do I want people to see me, acknowledge me? Or do I want to be invisible? Vin Vanbly would understand my dilemma. If he truly is the Human Ghost, he would understand.

I feel illogical gratitude to New Yorkers who bark, "Move it." They hate my ten-second inconvenience, but at least their hostility feels genuine. Although, there wasn't much solace in that muscle queen snarking, "Watch your fucking canes." Happened twice. Both huge muscle guys. I would have told the second guy to fuck off, if I weren't busy drooling. I've never experienced such a high concentration of gay guys actively ignoring me or hate-cruising me. Not just gays, though I'm more susceptible to their scorn. I see *Damn It* in a half-dozen eyes on every block as people calculate their work-around, and fuck me for taking up their precious sidewalk.

Fuck you, New York. Fuck you, too.

I should go home.

What am I doing here? Why am I sitting in a dingy, Formica-covered café, staking out a building across the street? Monarch Consulting. That's why. Today's clue hunt will amount to nothing, as did yesterday's leads, and the day before that, and the day before that. This is a dead end. I should go back to the Belleclaire as soon as I confirm Monarch Consulting is a bust.

I need to nap before tonight's Bronx trip. Damn club isn't even named after a butterfly. Why am I doing this? Because I'm out of leads. Where is the Butterfly King?

I hate it here, dirty café, everyone packed tightly into booths, people chewing furiously. Look at them, stabbing, slicing, jabbing, as if jamming food in their pie hole was a hated but necessary sport. Private conversations are a noisy competition, everyone focused on winning. The fucking nightmare crap I've overheard in this city. Everything is loud. Streets stink of garbage. Cars, people, noise. Cars, cars, cars, everything so fucking heavy.

Yes, I'll admit, a New York adrenaline rush kept me hunting butterfly weeks longer than I expected, but the weight of everything consumes me. Every night I lay awake, listening to the goddamn honking, feeling beat down, thinking, *one more day, just one.*

I can't leave. I'm in the right city.

They confirmed it.

I've replayed the scene a thousand times, wringing hope from the meager encounter, my chatty bellboy giving me an overly-enthusiastic tour of my top-floor suite. I hadn't noticed him much, not even his name, only the thick Jamaican accent, the clacking of his braid beads knocking whenever he jerked his head. I remember wondering if he deliberately made his accent thicker, hoping for a bigger tip.

But then.

I handed him a twenty and he sharply tucked it into my shirt pocket, saying, "Keep it, mon. Expensive city."

That surprised me.

During my four seconds of astonishment, he didn't move, allowing me to study him. The gleam, his eyes regaling an inside joke. He seemed older than the late teen years I originally assumed. His deference slipped from his smile. Without a word, he took my hand. In shock, I let him. The pale pink of his lips touched inside my palm, under the thumb.

The king's kiss.

Mai Kearns described it.

Shocked further, I said nothing.

With no trace of his Jamaican accent, he said, "Enjoy your stay."

He turned and strode across the penthouse. He no longer popped and jerked, he moved with grace and lanky confidence.

I cried out, *Are you a king?*

He didn't answer. Closed the door with a soft click.

I still remember how it felt when his lips touched my palm.

Now, I chuckle, remembering the ridiculous thrill electrifying me as I stared dumbly, too shocked to give chase. Feeling honored. The Found Kings welcomed me to New York. I unpacked, overwhelmed. Called the front desk to confirm what I suspected. No bellboy had been sent to my room. Whoever he was, he was no employee.

From Kearns' story, I knew the Butterfly King was a New York business man. Mai talked about him, how they interrupted muggings in Harlem, him and his army of butterflies. I wish to fucking hell I had taken notes during my hours with Mai, because I know Mai mentioned his name, but I can't recall it. I wish I had the foresight to take notes. What if they thought I was taking notes? Was I supposed to? They should have told me to take notes.

Would I have done it?

No, probably not. I didn't know what I believed. I still don't know what I believe. But here I am, in New York City. Couldn't even explain to my therapist what the fuck I'm doing.

Seven butterfly dry cleaners, nine stationary stores, seventeen florists with butterflies in their logo. I can't believe I ordered myself for flowers, hoping they would deliver a clue. Nothing. No Jamaican accents, no secret messages. I ate four meals at The Butterfly in Soho. Great steak, no clues. Ten bakeries, four garden shows, and a really shitty horror musical off Broadway called Butterfly, Pinned. Sat on a stone bench for six hours in The Met's butterfly exhibit, waiting for a clue. The docent finally asked me to leave. While she stuttered out her

request, I understood from her mortified tone she had already given me a few hours leeway. Obviously, cripple privilege.

Butterfly Garage in Queens. Little League team called the Butterfly Boys. Ouch. A team name ripe for daily humiliations and wedgies. I bet those boys get the crap beat out of them. A trio of drag queens perform on Christopher street, calling themselves “M Butterfly’s Bitches.” Nothing. No clue. None I could see.

Where are you guys? Throw me a fucking bone.

I should go back to Columbus. Go home.

Home to what? Nobody needs me. No job, no friends, no groups where someone would say, “Why isn’t Daniel at this month’s meeting?” I’m worried about how much time I spend alone. I wrote to Perry, “I can’t see much reason to stick around.” Vaguely suicidal, overly dramatic. I never should have written that. I want to live. But I’m tired of living the way I do. Alone. So goddamn alone. I couldn’t even email Perry and explain I’m not suicidal. He forbid contacting him, and apparently, I just do what they tell me. Good luck explaining *that* to Margaret when I return. When I cancelled our last appointment, she suggested a phone session. What the fuck do I tell her?

Maybe that’s why I hate New York. Constant reminder that in a city of millions upon millions, I’m still alone.

“You a private eye?”

My sour-faced waitress stands with one hand on her hip, carrying empty coffee mugs in her other hand, a caricature of waitresses everywhere. The uneven, caramel streaks make her hairstylist look guilty of smearing a candy bar down the side of her head. Despite her name tag, I don’t think her name is Kathy.

“No.”

She indicates the building across the street with her jaw. “Why you bugging?”

“Fine. I’ll take some more coffee.”

“Oh no, we way beyond coffee. You renting this table. Fifty bucks. Right now.”

“Seems steep.”

“Fifty bucks,” says the alleged Kathy. “For fifteen minutes.”

Without words, I pull out my wallet. She’s got a point. I overstayed, which is stealing her tip potential. I don’t want to seem like a total pushover, so I grouse and sigh heavily. I can leave soon. Monarch Consulting opens in twenty minutes.

I hand her the money.

“I’ll take more coffee, Kathy.”

“Coffee is extra. My name ain’t Kathy.”

She walks away.

I hate this city.

I watch the streetlights with impatience, strategizing how I will cross without getting killed by a Midtown cab. The fear of being crushed under a cab is the one thing I have in common with every other New Yorker. The sun blinds me, which is irritating, considering I’m

not staring up. Wait, that's not the sun. A building's surface, not the building but a shiny thing attached to its facade. I tilt my head down.

The light turns.

We surge.

Oh shit. That square of light blinded me. I mostly see a purple rectangle in front of my eyes. *Shit*. I can't see my canes hit the ground. Heart rate spikes. Don't panic. This is nothing for most people, but I can't land on a discarded plastic bag or a waxy soda cup, crashing me to asphalt.

Focus. Focus up.

It's already fading. Keep pushing forward.

Another reason to hate New York—garbage. That's what New York means to me. Cigarette butts, and black gum stains so absolutely everywhere, a zit epidemic on the city's brown skin, every bit as unflattering as the real thing.

Goddamn it, keep pushing. Almost there.

The purple square fades. What the fuck blinded me so completely?

Eric told me, "You spend your whole life looking down."

I glance up.

The Midtown building is the same gray concrete as most, same size windows, spidered in a flimsy-looking fire escape clutching the side. If there's a fire in New York while I'm here, I die. Plain and simple. I could never navigate that. I pass the small parking lot on the building's right, plastered with impersonal signs angrily explaining rates, obligations, when and how you will definitely get towed. Signs are repeated two feet away, the same black letters, which makes it seem hostile to me. Nobody reads the signs, I guess. A chain-link fence encloses the lot.

In addition to office space, the building has storefronts, fashion hosiery promising comfort and fit like you wouldn't believe. A sandwich shop, some shitty souvenir shop, t-shirts, and neon, flashing statues of liberty.

My eyes search for the thing that blinded me with sunlight. There. Gold plaque. Weirdly positioned, high and to the right of the revolving doors, too high for anyone to easily read, bigger than an index card, but not by much. Why would you place it where no one will see it?

It's engraved.

To read it, I must draw myself to the highest height I can muster, straining.

TURN AROUND AND SAY HELLO. THE VV.

No!

Am I insane? Does that truly read, The VV?

Is this possible? All these weeks—and—is that right?

I read the simple words, over and over, unable to relinquish them.

Turn around? I can't turn easily, not with so many people on the sidewalk.

They're behind me.

They're watching me right now.

I turn.

Nothing.

What did I expect? A grown man in black tights and a giant pair of monarch butterfly wings? Just people, an insane woman arguing with a drunk girl. Business people, striding hard, pushing the sidewalk into the earth—oh. There. Camera attached to steel awning frame, trained to where I'm standing.

Say hello.

I'm surprised I know how to say hello. I lean against the building behind me, putting weight on my left, freeing my right hand. I kiss the underside of my palm, waving it wide across the camera's view. Mai Kearns did this to the high schoolers. The king's kiss.

“Hello, Butterfly King. I'd sure like to meet you.”

My voice shakes. I don't care. I found them. I fucking found them in New York goddamn City. My life is changed in this moment, and I may cry. I'm not sure. I'm so fucking tired. This city exhausts me.

“My name is Daniel, but you knew that. I would suggest a meeting at my hotel, if you're open to it. You know where. Obviously.”

A few people notice me in conversation with an awning and look away, not caring enough to investigate. I'm just some guy talking crazy. Everything weird in New York is completely ordinary.

Maybe someone will come down to meet me. I'll wait.

I found him. I found the Butterfly King.

An hour later, I get it. Nobody's coming. I'm disappointed. Maybe they review the tapes once a week. Maybe once a day, but clearly, nobody's coming now. I don't want to leave, but I'm so fucking tired. Took three fucking weeks but none of that matters, because the joy I feel erases all that misery. I fucking *found them*, in a plaque attached to a building. I don't need to go

upstairs. They wouldn't want that. The plaque instructs me to say hello and I did. These guys like their rules. Monarch Consulting. It's his business. This is his building.

I'm taking a cab. I earned it.

I fucking found them.

The Belleclaire hotel is exceptionally beautiful today as my cab pulls up. The hotel's green flags ripple and make hard *fwapping* sounds against the exuberant breeze. Today, they are victory banners celebrating me. I feel drunk and goofy. The street is packed with people living lives, talking, laughing, loving this crazy car-obsessed hellhole. I hate this garbage town, but right now? I love New York. I think the Belleclaire looks better at night when cheerful lights make the exterior bricks glow a cheerful blood-orange, hiding the obvious layer of grime. Right now? It's beautiful. Elegant. A castle. Today, it's home.

Will they call? Did I say hello correctly? Yes, of course. The king's kiss.

Roger, a legitimate bellhop, opens the door. As much as I hate the assist, I need it, and he always makes a big show of his assistance. Even he can't dampen my spirits. Not with green flags celebrating me.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Hey, Roger. Thanks."

Refuses to call me Daniel, despite my request. Does he call everyone *Sir* or is it just the cripple, this big show of deference? I don't know. I have his obsequiousness, reminding me of my inability to open a fucking door, the most basic thing in life.

But I don't care. "Have a good day, Roger."

"Sir, do you need a car for this afternoon or tonight? I know you like to go out at night sometimes."

"I don't know yet. I'll call down. Thank you."

"Yes, Sir."

He probably thinks I'm buying prostitutes. I would explain I've been hunting butterflies who interrupt muggings in Harlem, but how is that any better?

I laugh.

I found them.

I cross the marbled foyer, scanning quickly for anything that might trip me up. No wet floors. They're good about warning signs. I couldn't help but notice the number of yellow WET FLOOR signs doubled shortly after I arrived.

Recessed lighting, orange glowy balls and uniquely-shaped furniture designed to impress hipsters. Today's marble is dry and easy to navigate, so I admire the luxury, the tasteful intersection of big money and big furniture, big sprawling rugs, big fixtures. Despite my happiness, I try not to draw attention, which means looking as bored and ordinary as possible. But it's hard to stop grinning.

"Mr. Connors?"

I recognize that voice.

I like Jeanette. She usually smiles, nods, and returns to her work, making me feel like a regular guest. No fuss. Other front desk employees make cheerful conversation, moved by pity or trying to prove my crippled legs don't intimidate them. Having a good Tuesday? Need more

towels? Have you visited the Met? I cringe at every empty attempt to engage me. Jeanette never tries.

Jeanette says, “Flowers for you, Mr. Connors. I’ll send them to your room in ten minutes if that works.”

She blinks without smiling, her dark brown eyes, this gorgeous Indian woman with straight black hair, curling every so slightly around her shoulder. Good look for her.

“Great. Thank you, Jeanette.”

I can’t even carry them myself to the room. She knows. But she doesn’t say it, which makes me like her even more. Our transaction is without pity or extra deference.

Who sent flowers?

Duh. Who do you think?

I open the door to a grinning bellhop, same gold tassles I see every day, every uniform. They jiggle when he bobs his head, three times, to make sure I see him. Everyone nods like I’m royalty, a magnanimous communication suggesting, *I see you, Crippled Man, but I don’t care. You’re just people to me.*

I must respond with grateful eyes or somehow acknowledge their good will toward me, or they get huffy. I grow weary of validating people trying too hard, and it happens so many goddamn times a day in this city.

He carries no flowers, surprising me, but he asks for more space, and after I turn and move away, he pushes the door much further open.

“Okay, step forward. Be careful.”

To my surprise, a pair of locked hands enter the room, carrying a jaw-dropping explosion of flora. I’ve only seen arrangements this size when watching the Kentucky Derby. The employee hidden behind the flowers staggers to the writing desk, guided by his friend. Once the two succeed in landing it, they position it carefully, making sure it’s centered and not easily nudged if I walk by.

I tip.

They retreat slowly, giving me a chance to ask them to remain so I can read them the card. I see their disappointment. Sorry, gentlemen, this is private.

I cough, losing my breath.

The stench of flowers is a punch to my face. I’ve never seen *anything*—so many roses, I couldn’t estimate their number. Pale, fragile lilies narrow to flaming fuchsia throats. Daisies, Gerber daisies, or something. I can’t possibly name all the types, the spikes, the long white things like enormous hollyhocks but I don’t think that’s their name. I love tulips and didn’t even notice them until now, I’m so overwhelmed by.

I cough again.

I tap the blood-red vase. Steel—a massive iron bucket but taller and wider. I should have tipped those men more. Reaching for the envelope, my hands shake. I extract the card and rub my fingers over the textured, rectangular pattern. I take a deep breath and open it.

TONIGHT. MONARCH CONSULTING BUILDING. OUT FRONT. 11:45 P.M.—BK

I cough again, flowers’ perfume swirling around me, insisting its presence.

Okay.

Here we go.

Tonight I meet the Butterfly King.

CHAPTER 6

I try to gauge how safe a neighborhood is by how many empty cabs late-night cruise for spontaneous fares. Based on that, this neighborhood is not safe. Of course, it's not a thoroughfare like over-peopled 7th or over-trafficked 8th. Looking toward Hell's Kitchen, I see gritty, shaded buildings and street lights not operating at full capacity. The only drama is an overflowing garbage can, food plastics, half-eaten burgers with dangling lettuce, soda cups, and tampon box, which occasionally skitters further down the street when a foul breeze pushes it.

Why did I arrive so early?

Stupid.

A dare, a dare to the Butterfly King? Here I am. Come and get me. It's the same invitation I'm telegraphing criminals right now. I don't feel afraid. I should be. It's mostly deserted out here and I can't run. Why am I not afraid?

Finding them has made me overconfident.

Streets are shiny from the rain earlier, like they worked a sweat stretching from Battery Park to Inwood and can't cool down. I watched it downpour from the diner's overhang, wishing "Kathy" with her caramel bar hair would magically appear with coffee. New York street puddles are completely unromantic, balled-up gyros wrappers and cigarettes floating like tiny barges in gray street milk. The sidewalks smells like rotten eggs. Today's fifty thousand feet tromping down this one left their stink.

I turn my head, ensuring the panhandler demanding money still sits a ways down, not creeping behind me. Yup, he's still fine. If New York taught me anything, it's how to bark at a panhandler. I should have given him money. He's probably hungry, even if he seemed drunk.

Look around.

I admit to New York's charms at night. The city can appear majestic, skyscrapers aglow, a testament to humanity's achievements, etcetera. I glimpse the bright lights through a rare break in the cityscape, back toward Midtown, and it's pretty. I get it.

It's hard to feel impressed when you stare at cracked asphalt and slippery garbage the way I do. That floating cigarette butt makes me sick. Well, quite staring at it, idiot.

You spend your whole life looking down.

Eric's words always struck a painful chord, more since arriving here.

I often lie to myself, believing Eric didn't know me well. We'd only dated three weeks. I had convinced myself he only dated me out of pity. I sneered and told him I'd *love* to gaze skyward and enjoy the view. I raised my canes for emphasis. Wouldn't I love to look up and appreciate tall, green trees and contemplate birds, and such. When I met his sorrowful gaze, I understood. He didn't mean physically looking down.

I hated him. Hated him for dating me. Hated him for not giving me more chances. Mostly, I hated him for being right. I spend my whole life looking down. How can I not? Wouldn't he if he were in my shoes? He told me, yes, most likely. But it didn't change anything. He didn't dump me because of my legs. He dumped me because of my negativity. I still hate him. A little.

Goddamn it, quit looking at that floating cigarette butt.

I look up.

The fashion hosiery shop is long closed; they knew enough to abandon this block long before the midnight hour. The building with the plaque is dark. No one revolves through those doors now. A bodega at the far end of the block is open. They never close in this city. A woman, middle-aged, crawls onto that flimsy fire escape, I'm guessing fourth or fifth floor, pushing a heavy bucket before her. She uses the wrought iron to pull herself up. Cigarette smoke creates a smoky halo. Hair in rollers. I didn't realize women still used those roller things. A 1950's house coat. House Frau.

That fire escape sees a lot of action.

Half hour ago, I witnessed a lovers' quarrel on it. They emerged, seemingly for the sole purpose of arguing, then made up, and disappeared inside. Two secret smokers emerged one on a higher floor, I guessed, and a few minutes ago, another on the second floor. Each one waved their hands, attempting to dissipate proof before crawling inside. A city of secret smokers.

As expected, House Frau dumps a dark liquid straight over, splattering one of the few remaining lot cars. An extra wet splat draws my eye. She poured out her sponge and it's stuck to a windshield. I hear her mutter, "Aw, fuck's sake."

She stares over the railing, mourning the lost sponge. She disappears inside.

Two black men appear at the far end, near the bodega, goofing, shoulder shoving, too far for me to hear any conversation, only giddy laughter. I'm jealous of their inside jokes and their friendship. I'm jealous of how easy it is for them to walk down a street. They have no idea. No hurry to reach their destination. I don't care if you're a Millennial, pull up your goddamn pants. If my pants dangled that low, I couldn't move. I'm jealous.

It's 11:50.

It's time. *It's time.*

This is it.

Get up.

Go.

I've been waiting for weeks for this moment but now that it's time, I find myself reluctant. I want more time to think. What's going to happen? What will he be like? What if I say the exact wrong thing? What do I expect him from him—give me a life purpose? A cause? Please. I'm not interested in finding whatever version of Jesus he's selling. What do I want?

Calm down. Stand.

I slide my arms into the metal arm bands and rise. Center my weight.

No turning back.

It's time, it's fucking time.

I wish I had been able to sleep this afternoon. Now, I'm razor-sharp tired. Leery. Itching. Sluggish. I'm too dull for this meeting. Can we reschedule?

The black men argue, playfully, near the building's revolving doors. I hope I don't have to navigate around them to get inside.

No traffic. I'm not going to cross at the corner. Right here. Across the street.

I feel an illicit thrill crossing here, doing this ordinary thing I've watched a thousand New Yorkers do—cross the street without the light. My first time. I can't. In daylight hours, I'd be killed. Run over. Again. This isn't supposed to be my life, apologizing constantly, apologizing for taking space. I should be able to walk in this life, except for the misfortune of having a sadistic, psychopath father. I should be looking up.

As soon as I commit to crossing the street, sure enough, headlights. Half way across, I hear a voice from the cab now almost immediately behind me.

“Need a ride?”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Why do I have to justify myself to this guy?

He pulls to the curb. He gets out.

Why do I have to explain myself, constantly?

“Look, I don’t need a fucking ride. I’m not going anywhere.”

By the time I reach the other side and turn around, he’s leaning against his trunk, lighting a cigarette. Oh. He intended to stop anyway. What’s wrong with me? I’m always suspicious peoples’ motive is pity.

The two black guys now jostle each other against the chain link fence. They’re in no hurry. I want them gone. I’m supposed to meet the Butterfly King out front.

From a lobby door, House Frau appears in her yellow bathrobe. It hangs open, the tie dragging on her left side. Korean, maybe. Damn thick makeup.

As she navigates around me, forcing a different trajectory, she says, “Asshole.”

Almost midnight.

Homeless guy sits on his flat cardboard. You picked the wrong street to panhandle, buddy.

There.

The far end of the block, facing me. When did he arrive?

It’s him.

He's tall, maybe six foot. The first thing I notice is his black leather kilt, bare legs. Work boots. Shimmery orange dress shirt. It glows in the night. His king shirt. He's a darker-skinned black man, not coal black, not light-skinned and despite our distance, his eyes capture mine. Even this far, I feel the weight of his gaze.

Why is everything so heavy in this city? We'll all sink into the earth.

He flicks his head, the tiniest tic. *Come to me.*

Here we go.

I pull myself forward. My stomach lurches. I'm so damn tired. I wish I had slept.

The smallish noise I've been ignoring behind me grows louder. Even the Butterfly King breaks eye contact to check it out. The black guys harass House Frau, out-talking her, asking for cigarette money and demanding to know why she's so impolite. Does she hate black people? She keeps repeating, "No. Only sponge."

Shit.

Guys, don't ruin this. I'm meeting the Butterfly King, a man I've searched—

The Butterfly King indicates again for me to *come* and I am, I'm coming, but he doesn't wait. He disappears around the corner. What the fuck? Can't he see my canes? I'm hustling the best I goddamn can.

Their voices get louder behind me. She calls them both *assholes*.

This is not good.

I hurry forward.

He returns, but instead of facing me, he backs into view. What's wrong? He spins to face me and strides purposefully, thick legs moving quickly. Nubbins for his hair, maybe the

beginning of dreads, and his shirt ripples in apricot waves. It flaps open, a black tank top covering his belly, his Buddha belly. Muscular as his enormous shoulders are, he's got a gut.

Behind me, she yells. I jerk my head. The homeless guy stands, watching, ready to flee. This can't be good.

Behind him, a small crowd of black men emerge, eight or nine men, everyone carrying baseball bats—holy shit, holy shit, *holy shit*.

What the fuck is this? I've got to get out of here.

The bodega grocer emerges on his front stoop, arms crossed in disapproval. They make a loud ruckus, grabbing at fruit.

He yells, "Put oranges back. Pay or put back."

They ignore him. A few toss their oranges in the air.

"Put back!"

The Butterfly King draws close. I see gray in his hair, the bristles against his head.

"Turn," he says, a thickness to his words convincing me he's serious. "Hurry up, Legs. There's another building entrance through the parking lot."

Panic rises. I can't get away. He knows that!

He passes me.

"Secret building entrance through the white SUV parked in the last spot. Open the trunk. Go in."

Go into what, a car? A trunk.

I don't understand.

"The parking lot is locked."

I don't know why I said that, as if this is our biggest problem. But it is locked, chained and padlocked. A white SUV?

The Korean woman screams. The men laugh at her upset. I don't know when the cabbie ended his cigarette break. I never saw him get into his yellow cab, but his engine refuses to turn. They're six feet away, the men and House Frau, standing right in front of the padlocked gate.

The Butterfly King says, "Combination is 7-16-32."

I hear catcalls and whistling behind us, much closer, and though I've never heard this, I recognize the unmistakable sound of bats dragged over cement sidewalk. In front of me, they grab her. She screams and runs into the street.

Oh my god. They're going to hurt House Frau.

Anyone with legs could run. If something happens here, I die. I can't run. I will die on my back against a chain link fence in New York City for no reason at all.

The Butterfly King says, "I'll handle this. 7-16-32. Open the lock."

My hands grab the padlock, but they're shaking. My fingers won't work.

I hear the cab door open and a man's voice demands, "Get out."

My hands fumble at the combination lock. 7-16-32!

Behind me, a man says, "You're taking our men."

"Not intentionally. No disrespect."

If he's nervous, the Butterfly King conveys none.

"If they want out of gang life, we help. Our full amnesty requires absolute silence and forgiveness of all debts. Men work off their crimes through community service. They will never reveal gang secrets. Nobody wants trouble. Butterfly Men want peace."

"Hear that?" The leader says, louder. "He just want peace. *Peace* what he want."

Other men grumble their disbelief. I have to focus on the combination, breathing, getting my fingers to twist the tumbler. From the corner of my eye, I see an orange ascend. I hear the smack when it lands in an open palm.

“I’m here alone,” the Butterfly King says. “No threat. Let us be men of peace.”

Calm down. 7-16-32.

House Frau screams, “Assholes!”

“We notice you alone, gee,” The man’s voice says. “We *know* you all alone.”

Damn it, I missed the sixteen. I have to start over.

Quit trembling.

“We have a truce,” the Butterfly King says. “All are agreed.”

“Yeah,” The leader says, “But yo’ team got greedy.”

“No, not greedy. Butterfly Men do not recruit. That is not our way.”

I got closer, two of the three numbers, breathing, breathing, one more try.

She cries out, maybe in pain.

The bodega owner cries out from down the street. “*Ma? Let my mother go.*”

The final number clicks, and my slight tug works, the lock is undone. I want to slump to the pavement, my relief so profound. I have to free the chains binding the gate, but I can’t. I’ll lose my balance. The cab driver complains loudly repeating he wants no part of this.

“We have a problem, Mr. Butterfly,” the leader says.

I lean against the chain link, tugging and jerking the thick chain until it obeys gravity’s demand, slithering to the pavement. We have to go. I push the gate wide, clinging to my side, as if worried I’ll be swept away.

We have to go.

Now.

“Yes,” says the Butterfly King. “We have a problem.”

I hear a gasp above me.

I look up.

The two lovers stand on the fire escape.

Get the fuck inside!

“Cousin, *no*,” she cries. “Leave him.”

“Quiet, Maria.”

I turn my head to see the leader. The leader’s face is chubby. I thought he’d be thinner. I have to tell the Butterfly King we can escape. Now.

The leader says, “You *know* how we solve problems.”

The men nearby grunt menacing chuckles. I hear a slapping sound, which I now recognize—an orange hitting an open palm.

“Ma? Are you okay?”

The Korean grocer is almost here.

I should take off. Go through the fence. But I can’t. She’s squirming. They’re hurting her. I can hit one with my cane before I fall..

Louder, he says, “I said, you *know* how we solve problems.”

“Yes.”

I’m going to die on the street.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

The Butterfly King says, “We dance it out.”

“Got that right,” the leader says with a snarl.

The woman on the balcony screams, a blood-curdling shriek ripping the night.

I'm going to die!

I duck because gunfire—do I throw myself to the ground. I hear the loud cracking again, powerful, but it's not—Dad fired his gun into the air to scare me. That sound isn't gunfire. Plus, nobody's screaming.

Wait. Did he say *dance*?

Oranges rise and fall, tossed higher, two bats cracking together hard, two men swinging them toward each other, same motion, men moving to the shiny, black street.

The balcony woman screams again. "*Not dancing.*"

I glance in time to see her collapse in her lover's arms.

A man tosses the a bat and the cab driver snatches it midair, jumps into position and swings hard, connecting with his neighbor. The orange tossers position themselves between bat men. The homeless man pulls out an orange, joining the others. Fat oranges fly into the April night, spinning against the New York skyline, landing with easy confidence in men's palms.

The two black men wrestling House Frau, lift her, supporting her forearms, causing her to curl into a flip around their bodies. She lands behind them, curling them into her, spinning them out. They unfurl, spinning, facing her again in attack position. She rushes them, leaping, and they catch her torso, lifting her, her arms stretching upward like a bird pursuing flight.

Oranges jump skyward at various heights, like a coordinated fountain display, and under them, the bats smash together.

What the fuck is happening?

I steady myself, fingers still clutching chain link, facing this madness, the grocer flipping toward two other black men, flipping toward him. *Shit, they will collide*—but, no! He flips between them, every moment choreographed

This is choreographed.

The bats collide, one after another. They pulse a crack through their ever-growing numbers, black men emerging from street shadows to pre-determined spots. They belong. This is this is their story, too. The pulse.

I can barely breathe. I see it.

I see the pattern.

They toss the pulse among them, a drumroll, the noise soaring and falling as if it were an orange, each man tense, poised, ready to crack! Crack! *Crack!* The power sparks between them, a commitment to power, lord knows what those words even mean.

Orange tossers spin in place, waiting for their orange to fall.

A screech from the balcony scares me, and I turn to see her spin in her lover's arms. A dozen secret smokers twist over the railings like gymnasts, dangerously manipulating the dark scaffolding in synchronicity, orange dots revealing their movement. I'm terrified for their safety. I want to scream, but my brain still fights for understanding of this moment. They snap into position, jerking their arms toward the gunfire bats.

My head snaps back to see the pulse gaining speed, sprinting, stealing my breath, thirty men assembled, baseball bats cracking everywhere. Forty men? Where did they come from? The pulse is too strong, too much energy. It's alive, the pattern now too complex for me to follow. I can witness half-veiled repetitions—*what the fuck does that mean*—pushing harder, faster, bursting from their rawness, screeching, sparking electricity to the Butterfly King, the crackling

pulse pounding into him. He spins—shoving me hard, open palms, insane because he’s six feet away, but I feel myself shoved off my feet, up and backward, my god, *I’m falling*—and the balcony woman screams, “*I love you!*”

Falling—

Caught.

Arms.

Arms catch me.

I look up.

I’m gasping, panting, fighting terror. What happened? I am in arms, many arms, a tangle of arms, so much strength, my panic recedes. Gasping for air, still gasping, lying backward and somewhat upright on a throne made of human arms.

He shoved me off my feet.

How? He never touched me.

In shock, in surprise, in more shock, unending surprise, my gaze finally returns to the street, where everyone kneels on bended knee before me, heads bowed.

House Frau, who obviously cannot be a middle-aged woman kneels. Every orange tosser. Every bat touches the ground, every man on one knee.

Tears pour out of me, unstoppable. I wipe them away but they keep coming.

A month ago I emailed Mai Kearns I would love to sing and dance in a musical but I never would. Obviously, given my legs, never. From my throne of arms, panting, adrenaline pounding, I gape uncomprehending.

They kneel before me, heads bowed.

I just starred in *West Side Story*. I was in a goddamn musical.

CHAPTER 7

I weep.

I'm terrified by how I feel, how loved and tenderly cared for. I don't understand these feelings. I'm angry? What—what the fuck did they do to me? Confusion manifests itself in tears, Margaret says. I have to rein this in. Wipe my face. My confusion feels like joy and it scares the fuck out of me, a wildfire burning away darkness to store this impossible—I *was in a musical*. I said "Pow." I was part of the dance. No, *central* to this dance.

How dare they? They fucking terrified me.

The Butterfly King says, "Notes tomorrow night."

With effort, he rises. The chubby-faced gang leader offers him a hand, which he accepts. "Orange tossers, late on your third cue. Discuss it. Good scream, Leslie. Nice work, people."

The balcony woman blows him a kiss. Twenty people, crawling and dancing around that fire escape moments ago, disappear into windows.

Baseball bat men rise to standing, pulling each other upright, sometimes offering the bat to be grabbed as leverage. Unkneeling. Everyone's unkneeling. I don't think that's a word.

Quit crying. Quit it.

It's over.

The throne of arms urge me to standing, arms securing me, holding me upright until I am ready to accept my weight. I'm completely—I—what the fuck happened to me? Elation screeches through me, but leftover terror shadows close behind.

Six minutes ago, I thought I would die.

Everyone's leaving. Why isn't anyone speaking?

I say, "What the fuck just happened?"

The Butterfly King speaks. "Sit rep at 7:30 a.m. Big shipment of daffodils on Pier 4, at Bransons. Get what you can. Pansies?"

"We're on it." The man who spoke is a bat man, but which one? Men who emerged from night shadows stroll back into them, bats on their shoulder. The last inning played.

He shoved me so hard, my feet left the ground. I fell up and backward.

That couldn't have happened. He never touched me.

"Take Keenan tomorrow." The Butterfly King doesn't need to yell. His voice is that strong. "And two more men to carry boxed flowers. Wrap it up, people. Traffic reopens in less than five."

He again strides toward, that fluidity I witnessed minutes ago, a man using his legs purposefully. He brushes by me, saying, "Let's go, Legs. We only have until sunrise and my story deserves every minute of our time together."

I twist my head to stare at him move beyond me, into the parking lot.

That's it? That's his hello?

The orange fabric bunches over his ridiculous biceps, fat cantaloupes. I imagine succulent juice dripping down his naked back, which must be lined with muscle. Why am I thinking that?

What the hell? I wipe my eyes. How—where did joy come from, punched into me, like a fist?

I replay the image of me falling backwards into the throne of arms. A throne of built on strength.

“Hey, Legs.” House Frau, who—sans hair rollers—is late 20s. Man. Thick makeup, already melting. “Hang in there. It’s worth it.”

The Butterfly King says, “Silence.”

House Frau, following the direction of his bat buddies, laughs as he backs away. “You know I can’t keep quiet, Mr. Butterfly. You know me.”

“Silence.”

“Okay. I’ll work on that.”

“Silence.”

I follow the Butterfly King through the chain link gate. I follow, dazed, wanting to demand answers, barely able to stand. How did that happen? He didn’t physically touch me. Did I understand correctly he shut down a New York street? What about the pulse? The pattern, too complex for me to follow. What the fuck was that?

I can’t keep up.

Before he reaches the white SUV, the car lights flash. He’s got a remote. The hatch opens, and the back lowers, which—cars can’t do that.

He stoops over and disappears almost immediately. His impossible vertical movement suggests he’s going down. How? Where?

I feel tears springing free and I stop to wipe them.

My whole body wobbles, re-terrified. It's over. It's *over*. Why still panicked? Or, is this joy? They knelt before me, all of them, as if I were special. Inexplicable hurt soaks me. *This hurts*. What hurts? I wipe my eyes. Every feeling fights for dominance. A realization—that it's painful to think of myself as special—and not because of my shitty legs—is what hurts most.

He had no right to devastate me.

My arms quake with anger.

Sound of metal dragging makes me turn. One of the men who attacked House Frau now drags the chain through the fence, securing it behind us. Above me, I hear windows shut. A dancer enjoys his post-show cigarette, the tiny orange glow leaving a huge impression. That insignificant flicker, soon extinguished on a New York fire escape, but so important at this second. How does anything tiny survive this overweight city?

I want answers. I want them now.

No backseats, no car frame, just narrow stairs, leading into the building's basement, just like he promised. I grab the sides, and with difficulty, sit on the top step. Throw my canes down these goddamn stairs. A green light sprays the landing, making my canes appear like alien artifacts on a surgery table. I scoot down each stair, one by one.

I feel small. Angry. Powerless.

Why humiliate me like this? He knows I can't navigate this.

Asshole.

I strap on my canes and flip onto my knees, using the stairs to force myself into standing. It's humiliating, crawling around like this, like a fucking toddler. They know this is hard for me. *Why torture me, you asshole?*

I emerge into a wide, basement hallway with giant wooden palettes, shrink-wrapped contents. A wet, unpleasant scent reaches me, like a delicate garbage cologne designed for basements. He stands at the far end, illuminated under a red exit sign, transforming his skin to an alien, purplish-burgundy.

“Let’s go, Legs.”

I bristle.

His voice is confident, measured. Sharp without effort. He uses it like a weapon. I am cut every time he speaks. He keeps calling me *Legs*, and I hate it. He was an asshole to terrify me, a cripple visiting his city. I also see him kneeling on bended knee. My heart loves him. I was in a musical tonight.

I’m so confused.

I march, wary and waiting for someone jumping out from behind a palette. Tonight proved anything can happen, any trick. Maybe the real trick is I’m following a stranger into a darkened basement in Midtown. Well, fuck. Too late now.

When I reach him, he pushes the elevator button. I want to explain what the dance meant, the throne of arms, to be part of a musical—but I’m still furious.

“Quite a show. Thought I might die. Shitty thing to do to someone who can’t escape, don’t you think, Butterfly King? Terrifying someone like that.”

He does not speak, but stares at me, a puzzled look in eyes.

The gloom gathered in shadows has a thickness, a texture, I cannot put to words. I should be more afraid right now, I suppose, feeling his power. I stare openly. I’ve earned that right. The Butterfly King’s power is electric barbed wire, shimmering and dangerous, illuminating his

purple glow. Is this real? Is he real? Am I waiting to board an alien ship, or standing next to an elevator with olive-drab doors, the interrupted graffiti, *cocksuc*, scratched into the grime?

What is the internal sensation, knowing your elevator arrives? I feel it. Immediately, the elevator *bings*, a miniscule tingle echoing forty times louder down here, into the dirty corners with peeling paint.

Once inside, he commands so much physical space I wonder if I will fit next to him. I feel ugly conscious of my movement, insect-like and scrabbling, nothing like his grace. I'm a sand crab next to a swan. I do not like how he makes me feel.

As we ascend, he says, "Leftover adrenaline converts into sensory awareness. You are susceptible to colors, sounds, sensations. Observe."

In slow motion, his index finger feather-brushes my cheek from my right ear down my jawline.

I gasp.

Eric is the only other man to ever caress my face with such tenderness. I drove him away. My eyes fill with tears. I'm so tired of looking down.

Another cheery *bing* announces our destination, the eighth floor. I'm trembling, I'm not ready for whatever happens next. My jaw still tingles, his touch—the delicacy, so unlike his voice, a sword—

Oh.

Wow.

I'm not sure what I expected, but not this.

A velvet, blood-red chaise absorbs all color and light, fabric imprinted with a subtle curlicue design. This luxurious kiss, fat red lips is colossal, superior to furniture found in a

common store, which means it was custom-made. I was expecting severe, not sumptuous. A school of rainbows prisms from a nearby chandelier swim over the curlicues, darting to a polished onyx floor.

Despite its appearance, the floor isn't slippery, just reflective. Once sure of my footing, I follow him. The loft is cavernous, and at the far end, a black fireplace matches the floor, polished to gleaming. Intricate-patterned rugs hang on exposed brick, medieval banners almost, proclaiming wealth and power. Everything is power. Stark windows stand naked and strong, allowing New York's skyline inside, just as naked and strong. Walking deeper, I see the skyline is mirrored against the floor, a shocking illusion, as if this were the true New York, and the outside city a *trompe-l'œil*.

A dozen chandeliers—more than a dozen—paint the reflected New York in rainbow fragments, emphasizing, red, orange, yellow, green, blue violet, promising...I don't know. I can't find words. The city is *protected* in this reflection. What does that mean? I don't fucking know. This space tricks my mind, making me think weird thoughts.

His kilt's on the floor, obscuring the reflection.

Without looking to me, he announces, "I prefer to be naked. Please make yourself as comfortable as suits you."

Each muscle in his ass jiggles as he walks the New York skyline.

He turns the corner.

I didn't realize there was a corner.

When I catch up, I find him in the adjoining room, too huge to be an alcove though smaller than the main space, standing at long black table, same sheen as the floor. Floor to

ceiling windows are filled with hundreds of glass circles embedded, like stained glass. I can't see the pattern, but they look familiar.

“Is that glass cut from the bottom of beer bottles?”

“Yes.”

He's wearing glasses now, wire-frames, studying a piece of paper.

Though the dominant circle color is black, I suspect that's only because it's night. I discern shades, some greens, some orangish, maybe brown. The five chandeliers above the table are dim, casting no rainbows, but enough to see the bottle-colors. What is with this guy and chandeliers? He's obsessed. The window is hypnotic. I feel a pattern's presence, though I cannot identify it. Why is that?

He says, “Designed and crafted by men who self-identify as alcoholics. Some sober for decades, some men for six months. This art is their commitment to themselves, to their community, to life.”

Tears pour out of me again, unbidden, and I don't understand why. Everything feels like a hard gut punch. I wish I slept at the hotel. I'm too emotional.

The throne of arms, the way they caught me, they were ready—*ready* for me. How could they anticipate my being lifted from the ground? Did any of those men help build this ...this...?

I can't do this. I can't take this.

“Legs, I need you to do something. Take a chair. You'll use my laptop.”

My whole body lurches to obey before I stop myself, mid-step.

“I know we haven't been formally introduced, but I'm not a fan of your nickname. I'd appreciate your calling me *Daniel*.”

He seems surprised, then nods to the chair.

Whatever.

Mind games.

It takes me longer to sit than most people, which I have plenty of time to eye his cock, almost at eye-level. Is it a big one? Seems fat. When soft, you can never tell. I'm a grower, myself. I love his gut, his muscle shoulders and round biceps, all of him beefy and hot as fuck. A smattering of short black curls on his chest. Is this sexual? Is he testing me?

He hands me the paper. "Log into that bank's website and access the account listed."

"Why?"

"Do it, please." He walks away. "Tea? Water?"

"Water."

Three feet away is a kitchenette and as he busies himself with preparing beverages, I Google the bank's web address, confirmation his address is a real website. He makes tea, silently, as if alone. The login works and I find myself staring at an account balance which must be wrong, so crisp and round are all those zeros. I count them a second time. Eleven million dollars.

This shocks me.

Why?

I'm richer than this. I've had the lawsuit money all my adult life. I didn't earn it. I won it shamefully, betraying Frank. Real wealth, like the roundness of this number, shocks me.

"Do not explore the account. There is information there which is none of your business. Do you see the balance?"

"Why the fuck would you make me log in, if this is none of my business?"

I'm sick of their secrets. Their fucking manipulative games.

“Do you see the balance?”

“What the fuck did you do to me out there? I fell—upward. How—”

“Do you see the balance.”

Goddamn it!

“Yes. Yes, I see the stupid balance. It’s eleven million dollars. Yes.”

“Make an online transfer to the account listed. Transfer any amount greater than one-hundred thousand dollars, but no more than three million. You choose the amount.”

“No.”

“Do it, Legs.”

I bristle.

“No, I don’t think I will. I’m tired of doing what you people want with no explanation. How do I know this is legal, or you’re scamming me—”

Oh god. Of course this is a scam. Of course it is. My gaze darts to seek video cameras, or see if the webcam is on, but I don’t think so. Could I be monitored from a cam in the beer bottle window? It’s a scam.

No.

I was in a musical. You don’t do that—make that effort when you’re scamming someone.

“Do it, Legs,” he says with the same patience telling the Korean man, *silence*.

“Actually, no thank you. Not until discuss what happened out there. And quit calling me *Legs*, goddamn it. It’s fucking rude.”

He says, “Turn over the second piece of paper. The one face down on your right.”

I snatch it.

He’s an asshole.

The document promises the money transfer is legal. I am identified by name, excused from any wrong-doing, and the document is notarized.

“Your copy. Everything is legal.”

Still feels illegal. Something is off, here. I know it.

I sneak a glance. He’s an older man, maybe 50s? 60s? I can’t tell. Love handles. He’s aging. His ass looks better, rounder, than mine ever did. I fight the urge to want to bite it, to taste it. I love eating ass, limited experience that I’ve had.

“Finish the task, Legs.”

Did he bust me staring?

I guess I’m doing this. Clearly, no answers are coming until I finish this particular assignment. I reread the disclaimer, verifying it seems legit. I transfer, \$2,823,419.22, just to be an ass. Why am I irritated? An hour ago, I sat on a bench, desperate to meet this man. Now, I’m pissing and moaning, minutes after they staged an entire choreographed—those oranges flew through the night with a synchronicity I barely comprehended in the moment, let alone remember now. I have to remember it all.

The teapot screams its readiness and, without speaking, he completes his task while I complete mine. With our beverages, he passes me, settling into a leather chair before the fireplace. I log out. Attach my braces so I can join him there. The time it takes me to move ten feet away is enough for him to ignite a small fire.

He sits. Blows his tea to cool it. “You have questions.”

The flames grow.

“Yes. Many.”

He says nothing.

Fine.

I get it. We do things in his time, his way. I don't want to derail this moment, now that he's finally ready to talk. My skin tingles.

She screamed *I love you*.

My eyes fill with tears.

I don't need him to explain what he did out there. He punched power into me. How? Why me? Those people worked their asses off—that was—why me? How do I know he *punched power* into me? How could I know that?

He sips. "You're wondering how I met Vin Vanbly."

No! The throne of arms? The VV secrecy! Her scream ripped through me, and he pushed me off the earth! I flew up before I flew back.

"Where else would you meet a man like him?" The Butterfly King stares into orange flames. "In jail, of course."

No! Whose bank account? Why did they—

"Vin was my cell mate."

CHAPTER 8

Sunrise over Midtown.

The world is too bright. Staring right into the sun.

I finished my bacon. When did I do that? What time did he cook, 4:30 a.m.?

We spent hours by the fire, then he planted himself in front of the beer bottle wall. Then, window seats, facing Chelsea until breakfast. I stood in his kitchenette while he cooked goat cheese and red peppers omelets. Thick bacon. Four cups of coffee and I'm still I'm exhausted. Lack of sleep, obviously, but his onslaught of storytelling, dragging me through New York with him. The sewers. The library. Waldorf Astoria and Vin's street pummeling. The long nights at Vin's bedside. Back to the window seats for sunrise. Did he move me all night to keep me awake?

Rance says, "Vin Vanbly honored his New York banishment. Though unconfirmed, rumor has it, he stayed away an extra year."

“Why?”

“Because I broke his heart.”

He speaks with same evenness when describing his jail break.

“I know this, because he broke mine.”

We watch the sunrise.

It burns.

“More orange juice? No? Hand me your plate.”

He takes his time.

I'm not afraid of silence with him. He is a man who gets silent. It's not an invitation to speak, it's silence. I *know* him. I listened to his raw heart all night. I don't know how many times in life he has repeated his King Weekend story, but this did not sound rehearsed. He got choked up multiple times. Stopped speaking. He cried, describing holding Vin's hand, praying for him to wake. I bawled. This night with the Butterfly King might be the most intimate relationship I've ever experienced, outside Margaret.

He returns, facing the city with me.

“Twenty plus years since my King Weekend and I remember every detail. Vin's love is wildfire, a power touched once, maybe twice in your lifetime, if lucky. I do not wish for another King Weekend. One was plenty. Yet, some days, I miss the love we shared. Rarely, have I been loved so desperately. So fiercely.”

“Would you have quit your King Weekend, if you had known you were on it?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

We are silent.

“Being who I was then, my King Weekend would have ended two hours in. I had agreed to surrender. I would have tried. But no. Maybe not even twenty minutes, depending how he pushed. Vin deceived me because it was the only way to guarantee my success. He calculated correctly. While he grew more masterful over time—the king finder swung a sharp sword. It is always a sharp sword, no matter how skilled its handler. During a kinging, men get cut.”

“I’m not sure how to interpret that.”

“Men get cut.”

“That’s not helping.”

“Men get cut. Temptation to quit will be strong. You have no idea how much it hurts, worse than your worst-imagined hurts. The fire ravages you, burns away your false identity. You can’t stop it. Perry told me he spent the first half of his weekend berating himself for being a doormat. Once he decided to leave Vin, he was surprised to realize he could not. Most men, once tasting their kingship cannot turn away.

“After my weekend with Vin, I witnessed my shortcomings with clarity. To this day, it grieves me Vin correctly assessed I would quit. A year after my kinging, I struggled with shame, unsure I was strong enough to remain a Found King. Vin knew I couldn’t surrender willingly. What right had I to be here?”

“Where’s here?”

“Right here. This man.”

He gets quiet. Sips coffee.

“Make no mistake, I love myself for what I endured. I am gentle with heart and my choices. And, Vin knew I would quit. I carry this burden of self-knowledge as best I am able.”

I want to argue, to protest. I’m shocked he so readily admits this perceived flaw. I’ve seen his strength. I’ve seen his heart. He is my king. I thought strong men felt invulnerable.

He stares at his city, the sun confirming today’s authority. Commuting, honking, screeching. The day has begun. New York is gorgeous. How did I not understand this?

“Did you ever forgive Vin?”

“Yes. Many years later, a man I mentored decided to discard his life, his wife, his two daughters. He fell victim to disappointment, failed dreams. He felt he didn’t deserve their love and also he felt he deserved better. I stripped his defenses to expose his truth. I wanted him to choose his future knowing himself.”

He takes another sip.

“He chose his wife. He’s a better father, now. He also finally pursues his lifelong dream. And he no longer considers me a friend. We do not speak. The day he ended our friendship, I understood Vin Vanbly. Vin understood the sacrifice when he showed me all his love.”

“What about Vin’s words outside the Met?”

Rance says, “Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“I haven’t seen Zacchaeus.”

“Yeah. What did that mean?”

“I never found out.”

Do I believe him? Yes, of course. He told me no lies. But do I *believe* this?

“I don’t want to insult you, Rance. Your story is...upsetting and beautiful. I believe this happened. It’s also so hard to believe. Magic powers and ancient prophecy? Do you honestly believe Vin’s fairy tale?”

“It’s not Vin’s story. He is not the only gateway to the kingdom. A Found Queen in San Diego discovered her path. Her technique is different, of course. Usually takes six months. She’s in her seventies and each one takes a lot from her. She and Vin aren’t the only two. Our numbers are growing.”

This can’t possibly be true.

“Daniel, the Great Remembering is upon us.”

“Yeah, about that. Mai told me he has two clues to this thing. What exactly happens during a Great Remembering?”

“We shall see.”

“Well, the clues are together now. Kearns found you guys, so, what happened?”

“As you heard from my story, I was with Vin when he learned the third clue—a king with the initials DC. Years ago, DC revealed himself to The VV. He is one among us, a Found One.”

“Does he lead The VV?”

“No.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“No one. Each of us. Depends on what’s needed.”

“What happened when Mai Kearns and DC met? That was supposed to be a thing, right?”

“They have not met.”

“Why?”

“The must meet organically, when life draws them together.”

“Why?”

“We submit to the unknowing directions.”

He stares at Midtown.

Well, what the flying fuck? I don't believe this. I can't. There can't be a Great Remembering, that's not a thing. I don't want to offend him though.

“I don't want to offend you—”

I wish I hadn't started the sentence that way.

Say something!

Rance says, “But you wonder if the Lost and Found stories are Vin's crazed invention and there is no Great Remembering.”

“Maybe a little of that. Yeah.”

“All things are possible. Perhaps Vin was a fairy-tale-obsessed horn dog with grandiose delusions. I certainly thought so when I met him. But, now, no. The Lost and Found is a puzzle initiated long ago in during humanity's origins. The love must flow organically, so pieces unlock of their own volition. If Vin created a PowerPoint for us, these realities would never come to pass. You kneel before your sworn enemy and a knife he swore to use against you, heals you. Ex-lovers who treat each other well, improve each other, opening them both to greater love. I once said to a man, ‘I am jealous of your softness’ and I wept for my obstinacy. We became inseparable. He makes me softer. I make him stronger. This is how our mosaic gets assembled. No answer other than love. Mai Kearns and DC will meet when it's time.”

“They could be hit by a bus. Well, one of them.”

“Possibly, yes.”

“Why take that chance? Why wait?”

“Who says we’re waiting, Daniel? I just revealed *love* fuels organic growth. You believe love is passive, a fragile insect with shimmery wings, and if you’re lucky, alights on your heart. If this is how you conceive love, you misunderstand a Found King’s love.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look at the stained glass window.”

I crane my neck, but I can’t turn around enough in my chair. I can’t even see the table.

“Come.”

Goddamn it, we’re moving again. I’m fucking tired, and we keep moving. I was enjoying the sunlight over Midtown. Feeling good about New York. He knows it’s not easy for me to strap on my canes and move.

As we approach, he says, “Each bottle was cut by a man in recovery. Polished by a man in recovery. Placed by a man in recovery. Study it.”

The sunlight hits it hard, pushing green light, brown light, clear and blue tones into confusing blurs, pliant and yet unbreakable. The pattern emerges in sunlight, but like the pulse last night, it’s right beyond comprehension. Infused orange and raw, white light touching the table in long, tube rays. I could study this for hours. The bottles must be angled to refract—I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. The result is...

“Many come to witness this marvel, the light it bears. See the votive candles? Folks offer prayers to the light and prayers for the blessings of the men who built it. The window has meaning because of those men, their promises. Is this window magic? Or is the magic in those who repeat the story, honor the men? Do people create magic or does magic exist, waiting for an appreciative eye?”

The fuzziness of this strange light is hypnotic. I don’t think I understand a word he said.

“Why only men?”

Rance says, “The women wanted to create something different. They built a house.

Daniel, we await a special king. He plays a role in the Great Remembering. We believe he brings DC and Mai Kearns together. He may have been kinged as early as 1994 or as late as 2004. Probably not after 2005.”

“Because of what happened to Vin in 2005?”

Rance’s eyes narrow. “What do you know?”

“Nothing. Only that King Weekends ended in 2005. I interpreted that as Vin was hurt or sick.”

He studies me. “Don’t worry about Vin. He’s not part of this equation. He’s fine.”

“What do you mean *don’t worry about Vin*? Everyone says he’s the one, Vin can make you a Found King. Did he die? Is he a vegetable in a hospital?”

“The King Weekends—were difficult on him.”

“How?”

He chuckles. “Mai definitely gave you curiosity. Legs, we don’t have much time. Log into the bank account again.”

After everything he shared this long night, the staggering depths he revealed to me, he still calls me *Legs*? What the fuck.

“I don’t like being called Legs.” I know my voice is churlish. “You know this. Yet, you keep doing it. Care to explain?”

He peers up from the laptop once he finishes his own login. He turns the computer to me, presenting the bank’s login.

He frowns. “Your legs are the source of your immense power. Each time I call you *Legs*, I honor your strength. Why would you not wish to be honored?”

“Don’t flatter—”

“I have no interest in making you feel better about yourself. That’s your job. Not mine. I merely recognize power when I see it. Do my best to respect it.”

I’m crying again, staring at the beer bottle light. I hate him—this man I already desperately love—for trying to make me feel better about my shitty legs. He tilts his head, as if I said something odd. Damn it. I wouldn’t be crying if I weren’t so exhausted.

I can’t even remember everything that happened to me.

“Please. Login.”

Anything to get out of this moment.

I wipe my eyes.

Already my tears sizzle into angry mist. I inherited my father’s rage, letting it smolder and lick the edges of everything. Sit here. Type this. No questions. Okay, one question. Never contact me again. Why do they treat me like shit?

To my surprise, I am greeted by the roly, poly zeroes, the same fatties bouncing across the screen last night. The balance is eleven million dollars.

“We honor the King of Bargains and his son, King Jamie the Dancer, by maintaining the eleven million balance, Aric’s original legacy to Vin. Any Found Ones named on this account—which means all of us—may withdraw money as needed. Someone, or multiple kings, will restore the balance within hours.”

“Who—who did this since last night? Whose money?”

He leaves the table. “Whoever. Doesn’t matter. Money doesn’t concern Found Ones. However, if someone withdraws more than three million, obviously, they are in crisis. The phone calls begin, visits. It’s not about money, but a king who might need help. Which is why I insisted you transfer a number under the threshold. Tea? I’m making some.”

I stare at the balance. Money always matters. It matters a great deal. What if my money runs out and I end up homeless? Dragging myself to a day job, exhausted every day. I couldn’t hack it. All I have is my money. I live in terror of money.

When he speaks, he’s not speaking to me.

Into a cell phone, he says, “Call five.” A moment later, he adds, “Send them up.”

“Legs, sit at that end. You’re the guest of honor.”

I lower myself into the chair he indicated. Wearing a bathrobe acquired from a closet I hadn’t noticed, he sits at the head, like we’re in a bad movie about rich divorce. Even as he sips, his gaze never leaves me. Hypnotic.

I can’t think.

What’s that noise? A rumbling, a pack, voices. The elevator bings. I hear them long before I see anyone, loud voices arguing, laughing, shouting, sparring, a loud group of men—*good god, that’s loud*—turning the corner, ten or fifteen black men, pouring into the space, white men, too, two at least—oh!

They’re all over me, yelling, clapping me on the back, one man grabbing my hands and pumping violently, laughing and talking into my face but I can’t hear a single word for all the noise, everyone talking, yelling. Someone shouts, “Legs!”

Other men laugh, and shout back.

What’s happening?

I am the star, everyone clamoring to touch me, say words at me, they know I can't hear. For a second I catch the Butterfly King's regard, his hands folded in front, under his chin, eyes fixated on me.

The elevator chimes and more voices emerge.

Same as the first group, men clasp my shoulders, talking at me, and I catch the word "subway." A man sticks a finger in my ear, teasingly, and I bat it away, and other men laugh.

Are these bat men from last night?

The elevator bings. More arrivals.

One man leans in close and says, "Hey man, where's the Chrysler Building?"

He's gone immediately, replaced by other talkers, other hands.

"Legs, you got no idea—"

"You had me running—"

God damn it, someone asked me directions to the Chrysler Building two weeks ago.

Him? Was this the guy?

This chaos grows, no end in sight as the laughing and talking gets louder, freer. One lighter-skinned man throws himself onto the table, defeated. Everyone jeers while he pretends to be dead, until someone sticks a finger in his ear and he leaps up, laughing and chasing his friend. While watching, I feel a bony finger touch my ear and I jerk away, finding myself laughing. This hilarious, loud insanity.

I hate being touched. You're not supposed to touch an abuse victim like me, everyone knows that. But this. This is somehow okay.

I have never been played with. Never had friends tease me, not loud, not playfully, not like I'm one of the guys. Laugh at me? Yes. Humiliate me? Absolutely. But I'm never in on the

joke. I am a minority, one of few white men present, though I see two Asian guys, neither of whom was House Frau. They are laughing with me, smiling at me. How am I not the butt? Or, maybe I am. But this feels different, so different. Is this belonging? Is this what it feels like to belong?

Don't cry. Don't cry.

“If I may,” Rance speaks, slicing the room in half.

Antics and noise die quickly, not the jubilant spirit. Men nod my way, grinning. One guy, sitting halfway down, gives me two thumbs up. He bursts out laughing, so I laugh, too, though I don't know why. He's just so damn pleased, I ride his joy. The man next to him watches me in silence, a certain seriousness. I am shocked to recognize him. He was on the subway. I know I've seen that dude. Thick eyebrows. Serious expression. He looked at me the same way on the subway.

Don't cry. Why am I about to cry?

The Butterfly King holds an orange in his hand. All hands and arms disappear from the table surface, giving him free access to roll it, like a bowling ball. Slowly, it approaches.

I catch it. Look up.

“I ask you to oblige me, Legs,” Rance says. “Peel that orange. For me.”

Men snicker at this request. I see smiling faces, whispering, but nobody clarifies my assignment, so I begin. I dig my fingers into the skin, feeling that familiar sting, citrus under my nails. Nobody speaks, watching me peel. I look for confirmation I'm doing this right. Rance offers no feedback.

When finished, the orange and its peel sit side by side. I tried to get off as many white stringy things as possible.

The Butterfly King asks, “Was that difficult?”

Men guffaw, then hide their laughing.

“No.”

I’m being setup. I get that much.

“Could you peel my orange for me?” A man says, rolling his orange toward me.

“Me next.”

Eight, nine, *fifteen*, an uncountable number of oranges flood my direction with jeering requests. The laughing chaos renews.

I laugh at this latest absurdity, me, the orange collector, goalie arms extended, attempting to stop them from jumping my end of the table. One or two escape my grasp and are caught by sure hands. I can’t stop giggling. What the hell?

“Legs.”

When Rance speaks, silence reigns almost instantly.

“Legs, do you think black women are helpless?”

“What? No.”

The man next to me rests his hand on my shoulder, as if we were buddies. No one has ever touched me that way. It’s unnerving.

He leans forward. Every gesture creates an impact, as if he mastered nonverbal communication, and added a few the rest of us wouldn’t yet know.

“How many older black women, do you suppose, ask white men on the subway to peel their orange?”

Men hoot, laugh, peeling from the group, loud-talking in twos and threes. That woman on the subway asked me to peel her orange. I'm sure I recognize this Asian guy, too. I bet he's Japanese. What's happening?

Rance says, "Her name is Ms. Ellen Taylor. Her assignment was to start a conversation. She volunteered because she thought you might be lonely in New York. Two things Ms. Taylor likes to do. Visit and cook."

I stare at the army of oranges, awaiting my command. "You sent her?"

Rance says, "I sent dozens. Every man here spent time with you."

Over the din, I hear phrases I recognize.

"Got change for a twenty?"

"Does this train stop in Times Square?"

"Spare me some change?"

No. This isn't possible.

Don't fucking cry.

"When you arrived in New York, I assigned five men to follow you. Legs, you wore them the fuck out."

"Hells, yeah!"

The man who threw himself onto the table, exhausted, does so again. He was one of the original five. It's obvious.

Everyone laughs.

The hand on my neck gives me a friendly squeeze.

"You forced us to design a surveillance system," the Butterfly King says, and inclines his head.

A collection of papers attached to a clipboard appear midway down the long table, and the clipboard is handed to each man until it reaches me. Row after row, thirty or forty names per page with times and locations, a section for comments. My mind refuses to comprehend.

“When I explained your power is your legs, I never intended to flatter you. Nobody can believe your stamina, your determination. You hunted for butterflies before dawn and took cabs to the boroughs late the same night. You forced a twenty-four hour surveillance schedule for you, Legs, because you were killing us. And we are legion.”

The men laugh and shout at me and I feel my head exploding inside, all these men, all of them were at my side? I was never alone.

He says, “I did not choose your nickname. The community did. They began calling you Legs because you are an unstoppable force in a city of unstoppable people. You have no idea the respect you command. Every day, people stopped me for the latest news. Where was Legs today? What did Legs see? Did he take the subway? How late was Legs in the Bronx?”

Men snicker and one of the white guys says, “Bitch, you supposed to *sleep* at night.”

Everyone laughs.

I laugh while crying. I wipe my sleeve across my face. Fuck it. I’m crying.

“You’ll see Ms. Taylor’s signature on page three. After you peeled her orange, she delivered homemade meals to me, twice a week. She couldn’t imagine you eating restaurant food for as long as you have, so she brought pot roast and glazed carrots, slathered in her homemade onion jam. Ham with scalloped potatoes. Chicken salad with big chunks of celery you could pick out, because her sister didn’t like celery growing up, and she wanted to be accommodating, in case you didn’t either. Pork chops and—wasn’t it pork chops the other night, Jarrod?”

All the men turn toward Jarrod, I'm guessing, a man with a slight moustache, grabbing his neck affectionately, tugging him close and shoving him away, as he yells out replies and cheerfully swears it's no one's business.

Rance says, "Jarrod ate your dinners. We couldn't give them to you, so Jarrod volunteered. Ms. Taylor a good cook?"

"The best," Jarrod says, grinning. "I got no regrets. I ain't sitting on any regrets."

His friends laugh and I laugh too, thinking of him eating all those meals intended for me. I love this. I *love* this.

"With gratitude for your pilfered dinners, Jarrod will squire you for the remainder of your trip. He is your driver."

His friends laugh and shove him again, but he cries out, "No regrets."

My gut reaction is hurt, this hurts, because right away, I see in his expression this is not a punishment. It's not a *punishment* to be stuck with me. It's not a chore. It hurts, somehow, to think of myself as welcome. This feeling of belonging hurts my gut.

"Ms. Taylor would like you to join her for dinner tonight. Jarrod will escort you, should you accept her invitation."

I wipe my eyes but I can't stop crying. That nice black lady on the subway is cooking for me tonight. Because she liked me. Oh, god. I'm so fucking exhausted, I'm so goddamn tired. Yet, so alive. So powerful and humble at the same time. I was pissed they didn't give me a sign, but I never looked behind me. I was trailing butterflies with every crooked step.

"You are one stubborn son of a bitch, Legs. So many opportunities to find us. I own three Butterfly Florists. Men on the subway. Ms. Taylor. Hell, you even visited our Little League team in Brooklyn, the Butterfly Boys. If you'd talked to anyone that day, they could have told you

there's a two-year waiting list to join that team. Young boys learn how to grow into a community of strong men. A clue. But you never talked to any of us, never engaged in conversation, even when we initiated. Had to do it all on your own, didn't you? Any man in this room know what it's like to make life harder for yourself? Insist on going alone?"

I hear the thumping before seeing it, the closed fist each man slams against his own chest. I meet their sorrowful gazes. Nobody's laughing now. I place my trembling fingers over my eyes. I don't want them to see me cry. Again.

They love me!

All of me is dying and living, curling up into a small scared thing and simultaneously expanding, running, racing around New York City, chased by butterfly men. I focus on the sheet names. These sheets of ordinary paper are now sacred to me. I already know, I will read each name, over and over. I will memorize each name. I already know.

When I emerge from behind my hands, here they are, watching me.

"I'm sorry," I wipe my face. "Sorry about crying."

"You really don't understand power, do you, Legs? You still believe crying is weak."

Before I can respond, Rance says, "Gentlemen, morning report."

The reports begin. Pansies secured. Daffodils from Pier Four. They speak in florist language, business code, deliveries, schedules, delivery van repair, and who covers what shifts.

The Butterfly King says, "Who needs flowers today?"

Two different men answer him, listing names.

The Chrysler Building man says, "Anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Catelli's daughter's death. Three years."

The Butterfly King nods. "Done."

Jarrold says, “What about Ms. Taylor? Flowers for her tonight?”

Rance looks to me. “I think Daniel ought to buy her flowers.”

The men chuckle.

“She prefers pink roses. Oh, and two men remove the flowers from Daniel’s suite. He may want to sleep before tonight.”

Men laugh.

I’m sure I look confused.

“Scent is a powerful thing, Legs. Overwhelming. Can fuck your sleep.”

He wanted me to arrive exhausted last night.

Rance says, “Who’s light today—you two? Okay. Break it down in Midtown. Reuse or re-gift whatever you salvage.”

Numbers and quantities fly through the air, last minute decisions for weddings and other coverage, trading recommendations on who should deliver to whom, discussing family details way beyond flowers. They check-in on loners, a reconciliation between a middle-aged brother and sister, even set up a matchmaking delivery for one of the men at the table, the exhausted man, one of the original five. Flowers are a cover for their true agenda, making a community stronger.

They are all butterfly kings.

One or two men nod when I catch their eyes. *He watched over me*, my brain whispers.

“Abbreviated meeting.” The Butterfly King stands. “I’ve got to finish business with Legs.”

Chairs scrape, men stand, the conversation swells, less jocular, talking deliveries and plans.

Rance says, “Gentlemen. Say goodbye.”

Immediately, they fall, all of them, expressing my inner exhaustion. They land on one knee, heads bowed. Like last night.

Tears leap.

“Legs.”

I raise my eyes as he commands. Is it possible, he honors me with this nickname? I hate this nickname. Don’t I? Do I? Or, do I love it, now that I understand? New York turned me inside out.

Rance spreads his arms, indicating I should do likewise. “Show them respect. Let their blessing inside.”

I mimic him, uncomfortable with this expansiveness, which means I cannot wipe tears continuing to fall. I’m dizzy, drunk. Their power, the gift of their combined power. I am light-headed with orange mist and morning light streaming through beer bottles. I feel unhinged from time and physical space, like nothing is real, nothing could possibly be real.

“Butterflies,” says their king, “fly away. Fly away.”

The Butterfly King hangs his robe and returns naked, carrying a white cloth, and rectangle the size of a bank check. He sits closer, the stained glass behind him. The colored light flows over and around him, dressing him, making him part of the composition. How does he

make light bend around him? I don't know. I don't care anymore, I'm so exhausted, so drunk on love.

He slides the white cloth to me. "A souvenir to remember New York."

I guffaw.

Like I could ever forget the sheer weight of the city, my days and late-nights trailed by butterflies. Cars, cars, cars, cars. I thought I would die here, but I'm going home. Ms. Taylor cooked me dinners. I was in a musical. *Got change for a twenty?* A souvenir t-shirt seems absurd. Unfolding it, I discover it is the traditional, *I (heart) New York* variety.

I will wear this. Because I fucking love this goddamn, mess of a city.

My hands are shaking. I need sleep.

He positions the second item. I was right. It's a bank check. It's worn from folding and unfolding. One million dollars, made out to Terrance Altham. A sticky note covers the signature.

"From your King Weekend?"

"Yes."

"You never cashed this?"

"No."

"It's a million dollars."

"Yes."

"You said you and your parents were barely scraping by, so much debt after your brother's death."

"Yes."

"But you didn't cash a million dollar check?"

“I didn’t need Vin’s money. I needed someone to believe I was worth that kind of investment, so I would also believe it. Once kinged, money came easily.”

He never cashed it.

“Daniel, under the Post-it is Vin Vanbly’s real, legal name.”

Is he inviting a look? I should grab it before he changes his mind.

“Your choice, Daniel, is to lift the Post-In or continue questing and I provide the next clue. Choose one or the other.”

No-brainer. “I want to continue questing.”

Saying this makes me sob. I want them to king me, to love me, broken and useless thing I am. He *admitted* it. The Found Ones are kinging me.

When I compose myself, the check is no longer on the table.

“Legs, in Mexico City you will find a king named John Robertson. His contact information is in the car. Jarrod will return you to the Belleclaire.”

“Who is he? King of *what*?”

“Daniel, do you not understand? Knowing a man’s king name means nothing unless you discern the power behind the name. Organically, Legs. It all happens organically or it never happens.”

“I only asked—”

“Exactly. Instead of waiting to be invited. It’s not a race, Legs. You’ve been pursuing this too quickly. These stories aren’t meant to be absorbed in rapid succession. You will lose your quest by trying to win.”

“I’ll do better. I promise.”

Rance says, “I know you will. In fact, I command you to do nothing related to John or any kings for a full month. No internet research on Perry or Mai or anyone related to the Lost and Found including historical searches. Nothing.”

No!

“Please. No. I won’t hurry, I promise. I’ll be more attentive.”

“One full month.”

“Like, August full month, or a February—”

“One month.”

“Can we talk about—”

“One month.”

I don’t know why I’m so terrified by his announcement. I want to fly to Mexico today, well, not today, I have dinner plans tonight with Ms. Ellen Taylor. I’m crying again. She asked me to peel her orange. *I don’t want to wait a month!*

Keep your voice calm.

“At least permit me to book flights, get a—”

“One month.”

“I’ve never been to Mexico.”

“One month.”

I’m that House Frau guy right now. Damn it.

Rance collapses his fingers into a temple before his face. I am unable to break eye contact, overwhelmed by him, by hazy blue and greens, dotted with brown, diffused light bathing his nakedness.

“You will return to Ohio. You will digest New York. Reflect on my King Weekend. We’re monitoring your internet searches. After one full month, if desired, continue questing and go to Mexico.”

His voice is brick.

Do not freak about them monitoring my internet searches. Stay calm. Suggest a compromise.

“Can I—”

“Do know *why* I feel confident you will wait the full month, Legs? Because...”

Rance leaps up, knocking his chair.

I gasp at his full height, muscle and fat and naked brown skin. Behind him, glows refractions of amber and orange, purple and blues, shifting in sunlight, beer bottle wings powered by sober commitment.

My king.

Arms raised in supplication, gaze seeking heaven, he shouts, “Because *nobody fucks with the Butterfly King.*”

I can wait a month.

CHAPTER 9

The airport cab ride bewilders my New York eyes. Where the fuck is everybody? There are only eighty or ninety cars driving the highways. My brain can't process the lack of...everything. Wide-open space in every direction makes me feel wobbly inside, unsafe in the backseat. The cab's speed feels reckless, and I fight panic. I've been in fast cars. New York is full of fast cars, but no open roads. This feels dangerous. I did not expect a physical culture shock.

“My first downtown stop is Oshman Deli. Over on seventh.”

My driver flicks his acknowledgement with no words.

Okay, that feels familiar.

The downtown skyscrapers have so much space between them—look at that air. I'm almost offended, like a half-packed subway car. Crowd together. Make more room. Why isn't all this open space relaxing me? I was so eager to escape New York.

Where is everyone?

A green and sunny May day. Blue skies, so much sky. Wide, downtown sidewalks, shops, pretty fountains.

Where are the thousands, the never-ending ocean, each head bobbing a new wave to be navigated? In my periphery, New York crowds appear and disappear, phantoms. I see ghosts where massive crowds ought to be. This is freaking me out.

Calm down.

On the plus side, after New York, these sidewalks are nothing. I can't believe I ever felt intimidated walking down Fourth street with this much goddamn space. This is me *strolling* with ease, during which, right now, I look up.

So much sky, blue stretching for miles in every direction, all that untapped real estate. Why have I never noticed the richness of blue?

I can look up.

Eric, I'm looking up.

Once my cab turns onto my street, I feel renewed panic. I've been fighting this all day—this is Columbus, not New York. It's different. But there's literally nobody on the sidewalk. Nobody. Where are all the goddamn people? Is New York's imprint this strong after one month? I've lived here for the past ten years and never questioned the open spaces. I'll have to pay more attention, next time I visit.

Ha.

One month in New York and I'm—hell, I'm not even home *from the airport* and I can't stop thinking about my next New York trip. I went to New York. Found a butterfly. Starred in a musical. Made a shit ton of friends.

Now, home.

I'm home.

Same brick façade. The yard is ripped to hell, a landscaping frenzy. I'm surprised the cheap-ass landlord would pay for this much improvement. Probably going to sell the building. Pre-New York, the giant dirt piles spilling onto the sidewalk and shovel handles I must step over, would upset me. I could stumble. Draw attention.

Now? Post-New York? How can I even be bothered?

I want to laugh, so hard, so ridiculously hard. This lightheartedness, how did that worm so deep inside? New York was so stressful, every minute. Why do I want to laugh?

When the cab driver counts my generous tip, his constipated expression vanishes. He groused when I asked him to carry my bags to my second floor apartment, but what could he do? I'm a cripple.

“Thank you,” he says, with sincerity.

I smile. “No, thank you. I couldn't manage this without you.”

Is this what it feels like to be kind to strangers?

She picks up on the second ring.

“Hello. Yes, it’s Daniel Connors. Yes, ma’am. I did a few errands before coming home from the airport, so I just walked in the door. No, not at all. It’s nice you wanted me to call. Did you decide about your newspaper problem, Ms. Taylor?”

I can’t stop grinning.

The temptation to Google them overwhelms me. I promised I would not. Rance said they track my search history, but that’s—he’s lying. That was a bluff, I’m sure of it. They would never go so far. Still, I remember how Rance describing the blood flowing from Vin Vanbly’s broken body after the street fight. Vin would go that far.

They wouldn’t track my search history. Mai said that’s not how Found Kings operate.

Rance was bluffing.

Right?

Doesn’t matter. To become a Found King, I can’t cheat. I can’t.

Jarrold pointed at tourists crossing against the green and said, “Yell at them, willya?”

I screamed out my passenger window, “Watch the goddamn traffic lights!”

Jarrold laughed and said, “Mr. New Yorker.”

I didn’t realize I’d spend this month replaying every minute spent in New York. Jarrold driving me through New York streets, pointing out landmarks from his upbringing. I study the list of names, trying to remember who looked at me and smiled on the subway. Can I email Jarrold? Rance didn’t expressly forbid contact with him. He’s like Ms. Taylor, a friend beyond the kings. But is he? I’m not sure. If Jarrold emails first, I reply. That’s cool. I better not initiate contact this first month.

They’re kinging me.

They’re *kinging* me.

From my window, I see the hired landscapers, Mexicans, digging and hauling dirt, surprising me. The whole crew is here today. Where do they go for three days away—shorter jobs? They’re yelling in Spanish, ripping out chain link fence. That’ll piss off the dog owners. No fenced in yard for the next week, if they stick to the updated schedule. They disappear for days at a time, so who knows when they’ll finish.

One of their crew, an older man, seems so disconnected from the others, I question he’s following the plan. He’s digging random holes. I’m not particularly interested in backyard landscaping, I’m sure it will turn out fine. I’m more interested in avoiding the internet. Watching

them work distracts me. I guess he's digging holes for plantings. Why do they leave him here alone?

This is so much harder than I thought. I want to learn about the Butterfly Boys baseball team. Butterfly Flowers. Three shops! Now that I know who and what to Google, I can't. I don't even dare Google Ms. Taylor, whom I assume has no online presence, because that might be considered cheating.

I will learn to wok cook. Experiment with Indian food. My hallway closet is full of hobbies that never stuck, watercolor painting, chess. I should throw out the damn hook rugs. That was boring as fuck.

Only twenty-three more days until I can buy a ticket to Mexico.

Twenty-three days.

Holy fucking shit, that was a fucking crash.

There!

I see enough backyard from this window to spy an aluminum ladder flat against the ground, the older Mexican sprawled next to it.

Holy shit.

“Are you okay? *Hey.*”

He's not moving. I can't see any movement. He's alone. Not surprising.

Shit.

I gotta move fast. I march hard down the hallway as if fighting New York crowds. Back stairs are nothing compared to slippery subway stairs, so I move with reckless speed. I would have never moved this aggressively before New York. Is he dead? Should I have called 911 first?

I didn't hear him scream.

And it's not a huge ladder.

Jesus, why did I insist on a second floor apartment?

Fucking hurry.

I told myself I could handle a second floor apartment. Was that me being stubborn, making life hard on myself? It's true. I do. I should think about the dead landscaper. *He's not dead.* Panic confuses rational thinking—I have to get to the post office later. Mail cookies to Ms. Taylor.

Get some fucking focus. What if he's bleeding? I don't know anything about fucking head wounds. Thank god, I already have my phone in my pocket. Didn't even think about grabbing that.

Final few stairs.

Maybe he's okay.

Throw open the back door, push myself to the stoop.

He's sitting, rubbing his elbow. Not dead.

Oh thank god.

Checking for broken bones. When he notices me, he glances toward the building.

“Are you okay? I heard you fall.”

“No hablo inglés.”

“Are you...are you hurt? *Hurt?*”

He points at the third step, which I take to mean he wasn't standing on top.

I take deep breaths.

He's okay.

“Me preocupo que yo esté sangrando. ¿Hay sangre atrás en la cabeza?”

“No hablo español.”

He seems disappointed. “Sí.”

He's pointing at his head and turning around. I think he wants me to check for blood.

Looks okay.

Can't see blood.

Thick-ish black hair, I see he's not as old as once thought. Fifties? Not sixties. Definitely older than me. When he faces me again, I notice he appears weather-worn, his brown skin bearing the sun's wear and tear.

Watching me shake my head 'no' repeatedly, he seems relieved. What exactly is my responsibility here?

He works alone most days. The regular crew show up for big jobs, fence removal and erecting the new one. The day after, this guy was alone again. He digs the holes. Plants things.

Who do I call? The landlord? How do I reach his crew?

I want to offer him my cell, but I'd have to sit to free it from my pocket.

He touches the back of his head.

“Do you want...agua? Agua?”

Hollow offer. How the hell would I carry a glass of water down a flight of stairs?

“No,” he says, pointing to a cooler.

He touches his side, continuing to check for injury.

Maybe he broke a rib. I don't know. This is weird. Do I leave him? He seems sheepish now, nodding to me. Maybe the worst injury is bruised pride.

“Una mujer se acercó a la ventana para asegurar que yo estuviera bien. Pero no salió afuera como lo hiciste tú. Muchísimas gracias.”

I understood *gracias*. “De nada.”

In response to his hopeful eyebrows, I say, “No, that's it. No hablo español. Sorry.”

He points to the cooler next to the new privacy fence. He limps. Not a heavy limp, not from today's accident. I don't think. He's still shaking off the fall. I guess I'll stay with him a few minutes. Make sure he doesn't pass out. A few feet away, we pass a smashed planter, ceramic shards exploded on the cement. This smash is what brought me to the window.

He offers me a water.

“Insisto que te sientes y te relajés.”

His hands communicate he wants me to sit. I hate this. Like I'm fucking tired all the damn time. No. Respect his kindness. On a New York sign-in sheet, one comment read, “Offered seat. Declined.” I probably declined with icy politeness to that butterfly man. Could this Mexican gardener also be my one true king?

I have to think of people differently.

I sit.

He relaxes.

I drink.

He explains the landscaping to me, mostly in Spanish, occasionally miming the plant shapes soon to be here. He knows a collection of English words. He walks to a big hole, and says, “Tree.”

Yup. I figured that out, based on the size of the hole.

He makes explosions with his hands. “Red. Red.”

I don’t want to play this air Pictionary, but he wants me to guess his meaning. Okay. He’s drawing a tree and it explodes.

“Autumn? Red trees in autumn?”

“Sí. Autumn. Otoño.”

I’ll wait twenty minutes. Make sure he doesn’t have a concussion.

I find a smallish, terracotta planter in next to my door with a red geranium, a few blooms already exploded. A folded slip of lined paper under the planter’s has a single word.

Gracias.

She screams, *I love you!*

I bolt to sitting, jerking myself from sleep, half-yelling. My chest heaves. Dad likes it when I scream. Don't give him the satis—no. I'm awake. In the last seconds of each nightmare, I always scream, unable to fight it.

She screamed, "I love you."

Fourth time this happened.

Fourth.

I look around to steady myself. Plaid drapes. Rubber flooring. Last night's milk, the biography I'm reading, my cell phone. It's 6:30 a.m. Clothes where I left them, crumpled in the open drawer. I'm home. I'm okay.

Nightmares are nothing new.

But now, she screams, the woman on the fire escape. Her pitch, the sharpness slashes through them, ripping me an escape hatch. In the dream, I didn't scream. She did.

I don't understand. Did they plan this? Are they rewiring my goddamn nightmares to allow me an escape? When she screams, I wake. I'm free.

Is this possible?

Oh god.

I'm finally admitting it, maybe they *intended* this. It sounds batshit crazy to accept someone could penetrate my personal nightmares, let alone, street dancers throwing oranges in the air, and a woman on a balcony. But it's happening. The Found Kings are reshaping my nightmares.

I bawl into my hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

There is a place to live beyond nightmares.

It's possible. It's possible.

I can't discuss this latest development with Ms. Taylor. She prefers to do most of the talking. She asks about my life, mostly what I cook. Recipe details. She wants to know about Columbus, and what it's like here. Living outside New York City, I'm like a Martian to her. She never asks about my legs, which I love. I don't think she's waiting for my accounting. She's got plenty else to discuss.

I laugh and wipe my eyes.

My first friend is a talker.

Not counting butterfly men, my second friend doesn't speak English.

Horatio is now my friend. Well, until the landscaping finishes.

I'm embarrassed to remember contemplating sucking his dick for a hot ten minutes before we became friends. Why did I think that? Bored and horny, I guess. Handsome face for a guy in his fifties. Good build. Maybe even muscular. Hard to tell under that beige jumpsuit he wears every day. The Mexican landscaper and the lonely apartment dweller seems like a porno.

Sexual designs faded when I saw him chewed out by the foreman, Young Buck. That guy, I'd suck off in a New York minute. Sculpted chest, hairless, muscles hard and rippling. I ignored Young Buck's dressing down Horatio last week. I'm sure he knew I could hear it, but I pretended to be fascinated by something on my phone. I couldn't leave the bench, my weird draggings always attract attention. A moment later, young Buck stormed past and jerked a thumb at Horatio.

“Is he creeping you out?”

“No,” I said.

I’m sure I was defensive.

“Okay. Let me know. He’s the owner’s brother, so we can’t get rid of him.”

He said something else, but I was already siding with Horatio, angry at Young Buck for being such an ass. I almost snapped at him, “How the fuck would I let you know? You’re never here.”

Horatio who does the day-to-day work. Why fire the one guy working? I suppose they’re working other job sites. Horatio probably gets assigned the lower-priority jobs, ones easy to work alone.

Though the scolding sure looked humiliating, Horatio didn’t seem particularly devastated. As Young Buck stormed back to his truck, Horatio winced and grinned. I crossed my eyes, jerking them at Young Buck, and Horatio laughed.

We became friends. Seemed tacky to think of sucking his cock after that.

Most of the words Horatio taught me relate to flowers and foliage. Not terribly helpful for Mexico. I tried to ask about Mexico, but it was confusing and led nowhere. No big deal. I’m assuming John Robertson speaks English.

Horatio asked about my legs, while we munched peanut butter cookies I had made for his afternoon break. We navigated those waters better than with people who speak English. He pointed at my legs. I shook my head and said, “No. Por favor.”

He agreed.

No more questions.

We became better friends.

I've told my story. Margaret knows every harrowing detail. My lawyer heard everything, every specific humiliation. I still hate that guy. I spoke at a graduate level psychology class a few years ago, Margaret assuring me it would be healing. *Which hurt worse, the cuttings or burns? Could you describe the pain? What behavioral triggers did you notice, if anything, before each event?*

Not healing.

We are all fucked up. Just because I wear my fucked-upness externally, doesn't mean I owe an explanation to the world. Still, I was surprised I did not mind Horatio's curiosity. I feel a new respect for that word. There's a difference between curiosity and insistence. Horatio didn't mind I refused to explain. Doesn't matter. I could tell him everything and he'd never understand—

A word.

He'd never understand a single word.

Wait, wait, wait.

Think this through.

Could I tell him the latest revelation? I haven't told anyone about the nightmares, how she screams. Who would I tell? Nobody. And now, this one. Could I tell Horatio?

He did it to me.

Told a story the other day, lasted three or four minutes, and as expected, I understood nothing. I think he wanted to hear himself speak. I get it. After days of speaking to no one but UPS and food delivery people, you need to hear your own voice. Make sure you're still alive.

I could tell him about the combination.

Huh.

Think this through. Don't rush into anything.

I could tell him.

Am I doing this? Today?

I have to decide.

They're closed to finished. The landlord and Young Buck walked the property yesterday, admiring the fence's new stain, the rock formation with *glicinas* spilling over, a green spring gurgling wisteria. Soon, Horatio will move on. Probably next week, depending on if Young Buck and the crew assist. Flower boxes in front remain empty. Impatiens need planting. Sod's finished, and the watering system is hooked up. Horatio showed me. Maybe three days more if everybody helps.

I have to decide.

Do I tell him what I think is true?

I've been considering this for two days. Running out of time.

Cloudy today. Rained one day last week, but otherwise, quite hospitable for his labor. That probably doesn't mean much. Horatio will still dig holes and plant flowers in hot July and scorching August.

He pokes his head around the side of the building and gives me his familiar smile.

“Dos minutos.”

I nod. Cross to our break bench.

I sit.

I watch the underside of his boots, ass in the air, as he digs and plants. I can't believe I thought about sucking him off. He's a sweetheart.

Horatio carries empty trays to his truck, jutting his chin my way to indicate he'll be back. I nod, *no problem*. We're not such bad communicators after all. I still don't know why he limps but if I want him to not ask about my legs, hardly seems fair I should as about his.

The designer did a good job, whoever envisioned this combination of bushes and trees, flower beds and stone walkways. A two-bench sitting area, under trees which will grow big, a grilling area with tables, hastas and easy-maintenance greens inviting, welcoming. This no longer a place to be navigated, but a destination in itself. Privacy fence. The wisteria waterfalling over artful boulders.

Pretty.

He sits with a slight grimace, which I assume means back problems. He indicated such last week. Together, we enjoy silence, watching today's latest greening adventure in Ohio's version of Spring.

Can I do this today?

No. Too weird. Telling him a story *because* he won't understand.

Horatio points at a bird, leaping from bush to the twig-like branches of the new tree.

“Tordo.”

I'll look it up later.

We sit and I point at the *impatiens*.

“Impatiens.”

Same word in English.

“English?”

I answer, “Impatiens.”

We both chuckle.

Like other breaks, this one ends with no conversation having taken place.

Horatio says, “Tordo.”

I repeat today’s word and wave goodbye.

I should have told him. One less day together with this friend.

I regret my silence.

Am I worthy of kingship? How have I proven my worth, besides surviving childhood? I shunned an opportunity—extremely safe opportunity—to share my heart. It’s not about whether he understands the words. It’s about whether I demonstrate courage. Today, I did not.

Tomorrow.

I’ll tell Horatio tomorrow.

I cannot sleep. So many regrets.

Staring at the ceiling, I think about Frank. The soiled money. I betrayed you, Frank. I’m not worthy of kingship. How could I be?

I need to stop looking down.

I'm not an idiot. I have to look down. I don't want to fall. New York forced me into looking up, focusing on people. I fixate too much on the horrors. I mean, I've got plenty of horror for fixation. But perhaps I see no future because I refuse to stop staring at my past.

A month in New York has apparently made me very philosophical.

They're kinging me.

Why? They know what I did to Frank. They know I'm a monster.

How can they justify this?

I have to be brave. I have to tell Horatio.

Today. Morning break.

It's 4:30 a.m.

I cannot sleep.

Today is much like yesterday, gray clouds, not blanketing the sky, but enough to battle the blue. Blue is losing. It's chillier today, which is fine. Whatever. Fear is making me colder than the actual weather.

Young Buck and his crew remain absent. Horatio plants more impatiens. The flatbed of his truck has several more trays, pinks and whites. By July, they'll cover everything.

"Hi, Daniel," says a voice.

I didn't hear the back door open.

"Hi, Tracy. Any gossip on the building sale?"

"Nothing new."

She smiles as she passes.

She remains the only name I know in this building. After enough times passing me on this bench, we were forced to finally introduce ourselves. I initiated several inquiries, once about her library book, but she deflects most conversation. I don't care we're not friends. Point is, I tried.

My life is changing.

Without this bench and Horatio, I would not know someone in my building. Without New York and Ms. Taylor, I would not have befriended Horatio. My life is changing. I'm so happy for that thought, because a few months ago, I didn't think of it as much of a life.

When Horatio returns to the truck, his face expresses a mild puzzlement seeing me. I'm here earlier than usual. He sits and exchanges the pleasantries we know.

I spy a flitting tordo bird and point. "Thrush."

He says, "Thrush."

"Yes. Tordo is thrush."

Horatio says, "Thank you, Daniel."

We lapse into silence.

I'm not ready to speak. But after yesterday's squandered opportunity and the end of Horatio's time in my hard approaching, I find my throat feels thick with panic. Now or never. Now or never.

Now or never.

"I want to tell you something."

I want to vomit. Am I really doing this? I refuse to meet his gaze, so I stare at the new maple.

“My father was a doctor. While I was growing up, in our garage, he tortured me. He knew exactly where to make cuts. He knew how to inflict burns without them showing. He broke my arm twice. He saved breaks for special occasions, a few years apart so as to not draw suspicion.”

Outside of therapy, I’ve never discussed this. I can’t believe that my abuse isn’t today’s story, but a prelude to what happened in New York.

7-16-32.

It’s real.

They’re kinging me.

“When I was sixteen, he lost control. He backed over my legs with a station wagon. Twice. They told police Mom did it by accident. She couldn’t lie well enough. The police figured it out right away. For years, I assumed I would die in that garage. I accepted it as a fact. My revenge would be to leave behind proof he killed me, so for years, I smeared drops of my blood over everything. The handle of rakes and yard tools. The underside of his work bench. The electrical cord of every power tool. Not enough for him to see or clean. I had watched cop shows. I knew they had special lights to uncover blood. I told them what to look for. Police found a hundred samples or more, dating years back. Dad went to prison. I’ll never see either one of those monsters again.”

My voice shakes. Horatio is attentive. Quiet. He knows this is hard for me, even if he doesn’t understand the words.

“I needed money for surgeries and to live on my own. Found a lawyer. We sued his insurance company for malpractice because dad was my physician, which made him responsible—as a professional—for my well-being, regardless of his being psycho and world’s

worst father. We sued for twenty-five million. We knew we'd never win that much, but my lawyer insisted 'demand big and be willing to compromise.'

Keep it together.

"Whenever we were in court, my lawyer demanded I play the victim, looking as weak as much as possible. I sat in a wheel chair, which helped. He hired a nurse to push me. I hated that. He regularly scolded me because my cold, seething demeanor wasn't growing sympathy with the jurors. He'd get mad and yell, 'Do you *want* to win this case? Do you *want* this?' I hated him. You know what I wanted? To walk. To run. I'd already seen enough specialists to know I'd never run, let alone walk."

Horatio watches me. He understands this is the story of my legs.

"The lawyers battled daily, arguing over the definition of abuse and what should be allowed as evidence. My father was already convicted but the money awarded me depended on quantity and severity of abuse. Was dragging me to the garage by my arm abuse? No, because it didn't leave a mark. But this arm grabbing, six months later, *was* abuse because he ripped my shirt. Or did he? Was the shirt already ripped? Could the ripped shirt be presented as evidence? No? Their experts reviewed the x-rays of my broken arms, arguing I did it to myself. After each day, I was reprimanded for not being a good victim. My lawyer wanted to hire a make-up artist to touch up my skin. Make me more pale. I refused."

The battle turns. Grey clouds are now losing to the crisp blue. Light illuminates the east, shining in windows and sprinkling impatiens in trays, ready for planting. The day is turning beautiful.

I take more breaths.

I've only told Margaret about this next part. I still get mad when she tries to discuss it.

“On July sixteenth, 1994, my father threatened me with his gun. He made me put my mouth around the barrel. Then, he made me choose who got shot, me or my dog, Frank. The last time he used his gun, he put it in my mouth and made me sing the Star Spangled Banner. He said he’d blow my head off if I screwed up the words. On that July day, he promised one of us would die, me or Frank. I chose Frank.”

I hate myself.

Enough details from that day.

“Their lawyers argued I wasn’t abused in that incident, only my dog was. My lawyer screamed it was the most insane form of emotional abuse. For an hour, they argued semantics, trying to prove the dog’s ownership was technically my father’s, and therefore his property to kill. They tried to argue the dollar amount on such emotional damages. This was the thirty-second incident called into question.”

Don’t cry.

How can I not?

I’m so sorry Frank.

“That day in court, I started screaming, ‘Does it matter? Thirty-*one* or thirty-*two*, did it fucking matter?’ I conceded to their side, it didn’t matter. I freaked out. Collapsed on the table, bawling. I was so humiliated.”

I can do this. I am doing this.

I wipe my arm across my face.

Horatio puts his hand on my shoulder.

It calms me.

“The judge ordered a recess. Jurors escorted out. I couldn’t stop weeping. I hated exposing myself as broken, implying maybe I deserved abuse because I was weak. In court, I worked hard hard to prove I was strong. I never showed weakness. That day, before everyone, I betrayed my only childhood friend, again. First, I got him killed. Then, in court, I denied the incident was even important. I’m a horrible person. Frank was my only friend.”

Listening to the words come out of me, I find myself surprisingly lighter. The worst is over. Why was that so hard to admit? I think about Frank daily. Margaret has argued Dad was a sociopath. I argued maybe he sensed I was gay. Maybe he smelled weakness. I let her convince me, eventually. But on my darkest days, I feel Frank’s breath and I know it’s my fault.

I can breathe again.

Deep breath.

Wipe away the tears.

“My lawyer couldn’t have been more giddy, once we were alone, praising me for my *masterful* performance. The breakdown was even better, more heartbreaking, given my chilly courtroom performance. He promised me after that breakdown, the insurance company would definitely settle. While he joyfully brainstormed settlement figures, I cried harder.”

I’m okay. I told it and I’m okay.

I wipe my face.

“They settled. Eighteen million in addition to all court costs and lawyer fees. I won by betraying my only friend. I hate the lawsuit money, but I live off it.”

Deep breath. Now, tell the crazy part.

“The Found Kings read the court transcript.”

Tears fall. I stare at the maple tree until I can speak.

“When I was in New York, I had to open a padlock. Since returning to Columbus, I’ve been reliving every minute in New York. The padlock combination was 7-16-32. On July sixteenth, the lawyers argued over the thirty-second instance of abuse, which I conceded as not absue. I think—”

Don’t lose it. Don’t lose it.

“I think the Found Kings are communicating they believe my version. The thirty-second incident matters. It matters.”

We sit in silence for another ten minutes.

When he stands, he looks me in the eye, confirming it’s okay to leave. Horatio speaks a few sentences in a quiet voice, knowing I will understand nothing.

I nod.

He says, “Te compadezco que algo te causa tanto dolor.”

The tone is sorrowful.

I wait a few minutes and then drag myself upstairs.

Although it’s only 11:00 a.m., I crawl into bed.

When I come home from shopping, I’m horrified to see front flowerboxes boast proud pink geraniums. Every impatiens planted, everything watered and green. No way Horatio finished on his own. The whole crew showed up.

Shit.

No.

I race around the side.

Everything's picked up! Nothing left to be planted!

Did I lose my chance to say goodbye?

It's my fault.

I went shopping early this morning to avoid him, to avoid facing what I shared yesterday.

Of course, I was reluctant to see him. Doesn't matter he didn't understand.

I didn't think they'd finish today!

Through the landlord, I could hunt him down. Why? For what purpose? I thought about asking Young Buck to translate my gratitude for our time together. But could I even trust what Young Buck would say? He hates Horatio.

I never got to say goodbye.

A night of contemplation didn't give me any resolution. Do I track down Horatio? Why would I? It's creepy. I will shake the morning fog with caffeine from the coffeehouse. Prior to New York, I would never walk there. It's seven blocks. Too far. But now? I can walk anywhere.

Through my building's glass front door, I see blue skies.

This sucks. I wanted to say goodbye.

If I found him, what exactly would I say? Let's keep in touch?

Outside, I see one person walking her dog and it feels normal. I've readjusted. The empty streets seem normal again. New York is over.

On the front cement stoop, I spot a terra cotta planter with a single red geranium. That wasn't there yesterday. Tucked under the bottom is another scrap of lined paper. On the paper is written one of the few Spanish words I knew before I met Horatio.

Amigos.

CHAPTER 10

How much longer can I nurse this Sam Adams? I should buy a third. Of course, they could announce my plane's departure at any moment. When they said we'd leave "within the hour," they technically didn't lie because they never clarified which hour. It's been three, now.

Why do I care? No one's waiting for me in Mexico City.

It's hard to catch the bartender's eye.

I imagine John Robertson's been told I'm coming, but nobody established when I would show. If he were Mexican, his name would be Juan. Is he American? Why meet there? Google Maps' street view reveals a completely ordinary building next to a 7-Eleven. The faded pink exterior suggests nothing exotic, just gritty, crumbling cement. If not for a blurry red sign with fading letters, I would assume it a residence. The Found Ones sent me to a Mexican bar. They cannot blame me for Googling this. I did as commanded, waited a full month, plus an extra two days.

“Another one of these.”

He flicks me a nod, filling someone else’s wine glass and a water at the same time. Poor guy. So many of us, drinking impatiently.

Why a bar? If this guy isn’t Mexican, why Mexico?

7-16-32.

That’s my new mantra. 7-16-32. We believe you. Do I believe in me, too? Do I? I’m trying. I’m trying to look up, Eric.

When the bartender delivers, I toast Eric.

Drinking alone at an airport bar seems the perfect place to reminisce about the only man I’ve dated. He only lasted three weeks. I demanded he owed me another chance. I even said, “I’m damaged goods.” Eric said, “Aren’t we all?” He said it wasn’t the responsibility of the not-yet-boyfriend of three weeks to fix me. That was my job, and in thirty years, if I hadn’t given it much thought, why should he assume that burden?

Touché.

But, ow.

What I hate most is how I played the one miserable card in my possession, the one forced out in court, the “I’m weak” card. Eric refused it. He was the first to treat me as an equal. Maybe others tried. Maybe I ignored their attempts. I don’t know. I find myself revisiting past relationships, fleeting opportunities, wondering if I was so busy looking down I let something slip.

I feel urges to call him though we haven’t talked in years, pretending I’m now whimsical and free-spirited, explaining my grand Mexican adventure chasing a fairy tale, after spending a month in New York, and befriending a landscaper who spoke only Spanish. I know it’s a bad

idea. We didn't date long enough to fall in love or become significant to each other. The only reason he means so much to me is because I've never dated anyone else. We weren't in love. He wasn't into disabled guys. He saw me as equal.

Announcement. That's our flight.

Same thing they said earlier, mechanical problems...

Damn.

Flight cancelled. They'd be delighted to fly us to Mexico tomorrow. Shit. A collective groan rises from the gate area, echoed by the bar crowd. An instant mob swarms the gate counter, demanding hotel vouchers and speedy rescheduling. I can hear yelling from here. I could never demand my rightful place in a mob. I'd be knocked over. I'd never make it to the counter first, even if I were standing three feet away. There are many races in life I will never win.

Bar patrons wave for the young bartender's attention, drinking games cancelled along with the flight. The handsome man I've observed sitting along the bar's curve grimaces. Even with today's disappointment on his face, he's still got a sexy businessman vibe. Forties? Sharp tie. Suit might be expensive. I don't know about such things. He motions for his bill, politely, not as quickly as a woman on her cell, smeared with aggressive blue eye-shadow, snapping her fingers, miming writing. Yeah, I'm sure the bartender gets it. You want your bill.

She says, "Well, how many extra miles for this catastrophe? I expect to be compensated."

Everyone within a ten foot radius hears her sharpness, and her berating the phone representative. I'm not happy with the airline either, but damn, lighten up. I've waited a month to continue my quest and I'm keeping my shit together, lady.

The businessman shoots me amused chagrin, dipping his head her way, a split-second “Can you imagine life with her?” type look. I chuckle. Shake my head.

I like that he noticed me.

She soon disappears into the angry throng.

After paying his bill, the business man passes me, saying, “Cheers.”

I guess I’m spending the night in Phoenix.

Definitely a step down from the Belleclaire. That was a gorgeous hotel. This place is pleasant, exactly what you’d expect in a three-star, overnight stay paid for by the airline: pleasantness. The lobby attempts sophistication on a limited budget. It’s as if the lobby is decorated to be interesting, but not too interesting. The faux-wooden planks are plastic enough to absorb the luggage scuff marks of a thousand travelers.

I shouldn’t complain. It’s not slippery, my rubber-tipped canes grabbing traction easy. I don’t have to stare down with every step. That’s something.

The bar area ahead looks...pleasant.

Funny how my brain has already rewritten New York. I crawled into that feathery king bed, night after night, hating the Belleclaire for no other reason than I was a celebrity, the cripple in the penthouse who moved all the furniture against the walls. I resented the hotel staff for knowing my name. I woke multiple times each night, cars honking and ambulances screaming.

Did I ever sleep well there? Not until the last two nights. Most mornings, I woke feeling desperate, knowing I'd repeat the fruitless searches all over again.

Until one day, it wasn't fruitless. I found them.

I seriously have to laugh at my idiot self.

The Belleclaire was lovely. New York was beautiful. I now feel glowing affection for each wasted day. Butterflies chased me every day, even when I could do nothing but look down. I was never alone, even when I felt completely isolated.

Good. Plenty of bar stools available. Easier to climb than accommodate my dangling legs.

Can I do that with my whole life? Can I rewrite my hatred, like I overlooked miserable New York in favor of amazing New York? Is it possible? I'll never fondly recall my childhood. But what if...what if one day I wasn't obsessed with my past? What if I were so ridiculously happy with my beautiful present tense, I could unhate?

I don't know. I honestly don't know.

The Belleclaire was spectacular, like a medieval castle, a Medici palace.

7-16-32.

I will try to believe.

The hotel bar is surprisingly similar to the airport bar. Both offer bland decor inviting you to stay for a drink, but don't stay too long. Low-hanging amber lights attempt to convey a cozy, intimate environment, but they're so bright, the effect is squandered.

I recognize three drinkers from the airport. We must be the hardcore drinking crowd. I'm not here for the drinks. I came for people. New York changed me. I want to be around people. I'll never understand how that city rewrote me so thoroughly.

They kneeled. They clutched their bats and knelt before me, me in a throne of arms.

The name-plated bartender, Lisa, hails me with a pleasant, three-star greeting.

“Red wine, please. A pinot noir.”

“We offer several—”

“Anything. Pick one that people like.”

I’m still irked, thinking about my conversation with the rebooking agent. She offered me an earlier flight tomorrow, if I was willing to accept coach. *I only fly first class*. She sounded surprised. I felt like an ass. My response was too vehement. I sounded like some rich bitch. I should have explained I can’t drag my legs back to coach. The aisles are too narrow. On the other hand, I shouldn’t have to explain my damaged legs. I spend my whole life walking a tightrope, wondering how much to explain and to whom. I have to let go. She’s not—

“Oi, mate, you missed your friend.”

I lean forward to spy the loud talker. It’s the sexy businessman from the airport bar, the same man who said “Cheers.” He nods at me, all friendly-like. I didn’t recognize him without his suit. He’s my age or older, copper-colored hair, closely cut, longer in front. His ears stick out, which I didn’t notice earlier today. I like his ears. They’re cute.

Eye contact. He’s talking to me.

He didn’t mean the young guy drinking dark beer, still absorbed in his Sudoku.

“What friend?”

He snaps his fingers and scribbles furiously on the bar with his imaginary pen. He means the only person we know in common.

“She left a while ago, yeah? Complained our lovely Lisa watered down her drink.”

“We do not water drinks,” Lisa says, defiance in her polite tone.

“No, no, lovely. She’d lost the plot. Total knob. Knobette.” The Brit raises his glass.

“Cheers, to awful customers.”

This makes me chuckle. It seems the lady leaves an impression on everyone. More importantly, he’s talking to me. What do I do?

Lisa is too much a professional to encourage this Brit’s toast, but she offers a refill, her subtle way of approving.

“Jack and Coke.”

I want to prolong his observation into a conversation. Friendship with Ms. Taylor and Horatio have emboldened me.

“I suspect she’s rarely wrong, wherever she goes.”

He chuckles “Some people never are.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t demand her way onto a flight out tonight.”

“Ah, nobody controls airline mechanics, mate. Not even the airlines.”

“She can’t snap her fingers at them?”

“Limits, mate. Power has limits.”

The Brit crosses behind the Sudoku player to sit at an empty stool two down from me.

Now what?

I’ve never had a bar conversation. What if he’s a total prick? What if he asks about my legs? I can fake a cell phone call. Calm down. It’s a bar conversation.

He asks, “Mexico City?”

“Allegedly. Tomorrow will tell.”

“We’ll make it. Bloody well better.”

“British?”

“English. Great Britain describes the entire islands. English describes people from England.”

“Ah, sorry. I claim American ignorance.”

“No,” he says and exhales. “I didn’t mean to be so crisp. Long day. My apologies.”

His eyes look weary, but then again, I’m sure mine do, too. It has been a long day.

“No problem. A toast to surviving a long day.”

Our glasses clink.

He nods. “Alistair.”

“Eric.”

Fuck! Why did I lie?

“Business or pleasure, Eric?”

I feel myself blushing. “Pardon?”

I don’t know how to answer this.

Alistair says, “Mexico City for work or pleasure?”

Does questing fall under work or pleasure?

“Pleasure, I guess.”

“Most people go to Cancun, Eric.”

“I know someone in Mexico City.”

Don’t want to discuss this further. I already lied about my name, and I’m sure it’s obvious, the way I redden whenever he says it. Did I lie because I don’t want to share my real purpose in traveling?

“How about you, Alistair? Work or pleasure?”

“Work. But if I do it right, pleasure. Pharmaceutical sales in emerging markets. Spent the last two hours rescheduling every one of tomorrow’s seven appointments. Bloody mess.”

We get quiet. Neither of us are verbose, I guess.

“Where are you staying? What hotel?”

He throws me a sharp enough glance to know I’ve asked an odd question. Too personal? I almost want to explain I don’t care where he’s staying. Just making conversation. I’m not good at this.

“A resort, private one. Stayed there before. It’s nice.”

I murmur appreciation for nice resorts, something empty.

We sit in silence for a few more sips.

I have to explain myself.

“I asked because I have no idea what to expect with my hotel. I’ve never been to Mexico. Or Mexico City.”

“You said you were visiting a friend. Didn’t he—or she—advise you?”

“Surprise visit.” I feel myself blushing. “Can you recommend restaurants?”

“Several. Blinding good restaurants, freshest fish and vegetables you’d ever find.”

As he elaborates, I ponder the pointed look. Why did he react that way? I wonder if he’s gay. I’m getting a vibe, an almost flirty vibe, but not quite. Probably not. He probably wants to ask me how I was crippled, and figures he needs to establish rapport first. People think it’s less rude if you’ve been chatting aimlessly for ten minutes. No wonder I avoid bar conversations. Any conversations. But what if he’s gay? What if we have something else in common?

Neither one of us is moving this conversation forward.

Or am I talking too much already? I have no basis for comparison.

Ask.

Take the risk. 7-16-32.

“If my hotel doesn’t work out, would you recommend your resort?”

“It’s not for everyone,” he says slowly. “Primarily gay clientele.”

He says the second half with ease, as if he’s decided be honest, despite the hesitant beginning. He may not be ashamed, but that doesn’t mean he wants to have the Big Gay Conversation with a stranger. I can relate to avoiding certain topics.

“Even better.” I make direct eye contact. “Since I’m gay.”

The barrier broken, we converse in earnest. It’s good we found some common ground, because neither of us were particularly skilled in conversation. He elaborates on discrete gay-friendly restaurants and warns me of social customs suggesting caution.

“Your legs will make you a target, to some at least. Don’t walk back to your hotel late at night. That’s the only worry.”

I bristle at his mention, but that’s it. He switches topics. He advocates interesting spots outside the city, a hot springs, a farm, and bluffs, or something. He mentioned my legs as if their brokenness was merely a fact, which it is. I’m not used to casual mentions.

I’m not sure how I feel about this.

He asks about my international travels, and it’s embarrassing to explain I have none. He laughs at my passport readiness for this trip, and I skirted explanation as to why, my readiness to escape my father, who I presume is still in prison. Travel is an escape plan I hope I’ll never need. Even in an airport hotel bar, conversing with a sexy pharmaceuticals rep, all stories lead to my childhood.

No wonder I spend so much time looking down.

Before I leave the bathroom, I test myself. Did two glasses of wine impede my abilities? No. I feel good. Can't slip or stumble. Could never get buzzed enough for that to happen. All clear.

Good.

I feel drunk, though not on red wine. The sheer delight in connecting so easily. Neither one of us are chatty, which means lots of silent periods, though once we began discussing travel, he opened up. Why do I not attempt this—talk to new people and listen to them? Okay, yes, I've heard more about the pharma industry than I could absorb, but who cares? This feels like inebriation, making another new friend. Doesn't matter it's temporary. At least this friend speaks English.

When I reach my seat, I'm pleased he gives me time to adjust myself, remove my canes.

Alistair asks, "Good piss?"

"Yes. Yes it was. Thank you."

We both chuckle.

I like his directness, but I don't know how to play along.

"Would you like to have a drink in my room?"

Yes.

No, no. No. Bad idea. My legs.

"No. I can't."

He apologizes, apologizes profusely, and then I apologize.

Then, silence.

“Too forward.”

“No, no...”

“My cock-up. I often mistake friendliness for attraction. Oh. Sorry. A cock-up is a—”

“It’s a fuck-up, I know.”

“Yeah. I fucked up.”

“No, you didn’t. You did not. I’m...”

How do I explain? This time, do not lie.

“I’m not experienced meeting men, Alistair. I don’t know how to...do this.”

He smiles sideways. “I believe there are photographs on the internet.”

I laugh. I like his understated humor.

“I’m not a virgin, you tosser. Did I use that right?”

“Pretty well, yes.”

“I don’t. This—I don’t know this part. Do we kiss? Do we cuddle afterwards? After ten minutes of cuddling, do you awkwardly suggest, ‘it’s getting late’ so I know to leave? I can’t do this.”

That was easier to admit than I thought.

“Yes to kissing, yes to cuddling. I do have an early flight, but you’re welcome to sleep over.”

“Well, good to know. That answers those three questions. But it’s more complicated than that.”

I can't do this, even if I find him sexy. I have too many issues surrounding my body, my legs. I don't want him seeing burn marks. Also, I lied about my name.

"Cheers. I respect your decision, Eric, and yet, may I ask, what exactly is complicated?"

I find myself framing words I do not wish to speak. I hate this. I don't want to hear his answer. "Is this about my legs?"

"How so?"

"Are you attracted to me *because* of my legs?"

Alistair frowns. "I haven't seen your legs."

"Some men are into disabilities. No judgment, but I have a right to know."

"Ah. No, Eric. Not your legs."

"The last couple guys who hit on me did so because my legs are fucked up."

He swallows the rest of his drink. "Are you a top or bottom?"

"Top."

"Well, then," he says, grinning while staring forward. "It won't be your bloody legs I'm after."

I chuckle when he chuckles. I take it he's a bottom.

"Eric, I don't approach men in bars regularly. Though from what you've revealed, I suspect more than you. Let's stay. Drink another drink. Flirt. Talk about things that matter, like HIV status, and condoms, where we like to be kissed, comfortable positions for fucking..."

He leans closer.

"...whether you like your come gobbled..."

Oh god, I really do.

“If we discover ourselves further compatible, well then, bob’s your uncle. Also, I will show you my identification and credit cards, and we will confirm my information with the front desk, which is the best I can do for vouching, given circumstances. I draw the line at revealing my PIN. What do you think?”

7-16-32

I lift my finger. “Lisa? Two more drinks.”

Alistair laughs. “Well done.”

He faces me, only bathroom light illuminating this room, and unbuttons his shirt. My heart pounds. Lovemaking terrifies me.

Before Eric, I was always overwhelmed with anxiety. I have too many scars, burn marks, angry memories relived when I get touched. I always dread the exact moment when my battered legs are revealed. There’s no mood killer like, “Holy Jesus, how did *that* happen?” I prefer sex lights out. Still problematic but only fingers see in the dark.

Eric taught me to relax.

Our first night, he insisted my overhead light remain on while he inspected my naked legs, like conducting an autopsy. I hated him. I realized I had misjudged him, he was into disabled kink, after all. When he finished he said, “There. I’ve seen your legs. You never have to worry about my seeing them accidentally, because I studied them. I don’t mind fucking in the

dark. But a candle or two might be nice, mood lighting. Also, mirrors are fun. I like to watch myself suck cock.”

I laughed and relaxed.

“Eric.”

The word shocks me into guilt.

“Let’s get off your bloody pants.”

Oh shit.

7-16-32! 7-16-32!

He massages my cock through the hardening lump in my jeans.

“Does this feel alright?”

He grins because he knows the answer is yes. My cock rises. He asked because he wants me to validate him, like a lover, dirty talk to him, maybe.

“Yes.”

He leans in for more kissing. God, I love kissing this man.

When we break, in his thick, rusty voice, he asks, “Fancy I continue to massage your cock?”

God, I love an English accent!

“Feels great. Real good.”

I have to get better at dirty talk.

His changes angles zips his thumbnail under my balls, which might be a little rough naked, but on jeans, feels like the right amount of rough.

A sound escapes me.

We kiss.

He tastes like hard liquor and the mint he popped a moment ago. I like the hard liquor taste better, somehow more authentic.

He unzips me and hauls out my dick.

“Smashing.”

I laugh. “Please don’t smash it.”

He chuckles dirty.

Guys always say they like my cock. It’s the easiest landmark in the neighborhood to compliment. Each one of my meager list of sex partners has said it. *Nice cock*. It’s the equivalent of saying, “What twisted legs? Those? I hadn’t noticed because I like your cock.”

I start getting soft.

Why does self-esteem shit pop out during my one opportunity in the past year to—why can’t I appreciate the—

Oh.

Oh! I appreciate that.

My softening cock is enveloped. His mouth, the suction, the heat, oh god, *oh god*, all the way to the base, his lower lip on my sack, and god, it’s still in his throat.

His sucking becomes a wet blow job, and I collapse on my back, driving up my hips, thrusting deeper into his throat. The surprise gags him. I love when a guy gags, suggesting it’s my power married to his hunger which drives him, sucking wetter and deeper.

Oh god.

I forgot sex could be good.

He’s better than previous sex partners, more skilled in his throat strokes, nibbling the head of my cock and then catching the spittle that drips down my shaft with his lips on a deeper

dive. I love how his fingertips massage my scrotum, like he's a massage therapist and they've had a rough day.

Oh god.

That feels amazing.

“When I pull off your jeans, do I have to be cautious of your legs?”

Fuck. Fuck! *I hate this moment.*

“No. It won't hurt.”

They're off.

I didn't have time to get soft.

Instantly, he drops his whole throat on my cock as necessary for breathing.

Oh god, oh god, oh god!

I don't know how long it lasts, the rocking, the motion of his lips touching my balls, like pushups to the head, and yeah, it's a fat head. Maybe I do have a great dick after all. God, I love getting sucked off. I need a boyfriend who love to suck dick.

He backs off, and kicks off his underwear, presenting me his own perfect dick.

“Gentleman's sausage?”

“Do English people really say that?”

“Only when trying to charm a Yank.”

With one hand, he guides me.

Sucking cock feels like Christmas, a holiday I love, yet happens infrequently. Actually, my sucking dick is more like leap day. He strokes my wet cock while simultaneously pushing into my throat. I'm probably not going to last long. I already hope there will be a second round.

I'm already more at ease with Alistair than after two weeks dating Eric. I've never felt this relaxed about sex. Is this because of who Alistair is, or has something in me shifted? Maybe I'm ready to have great sex, broken legs and all. I'm a man. I get horny. If a guy is cool with my legs and wants to fuck, why would I get anxious?

Fuck thinking about this!

I've got a dick in my mouth.

I luxuriate in the humid scent, the earthiness, the humming moans I hear when I suck him good. I am a starving man at a cocksucking buffet and I intend to gorge myself.

Wait until I get into his ass.

The second time I fuck him, I feel powerful, "frogging him," as he described it. I love this grunting, lovemaking fuck, which despite the latex, feels raw, wolfish, so raunchy it teases out this dominant quality in me, dominant in a protective way. I want to pleasure this man. I squeeze tighter, this willing prisoner in my arms, pushing my cock deeper.

I savor the wet sloshing, dirty and delicious, sex and sticky pleasure.

"Listen to the sound."

That's the dirtiest thing I've ever said.

I pull out—almost out—in long, slow strokes, eliciting groans, an Englishman’s groans, and I wonder if the English are more tolerant of people with disabilities, in general. Alistair hasn’t demanded any answers for my legs. He just wants sex. I may have to move to London.

I am inexhaustible in this position, my best position. My arms are solid muscle, strengthened by weightlifting and dragging myself everywhere. Holding myself up, push-up style, for the past twenty minutes, and my arms aren’t even tired. I can make this one last.

Let’s do this.

Let’s fuck.

“I can’t...can’t take much more.”

“Want me to quit?”

It’s my turn to tease, as he has teased me. I’m not surprised he’s exhausted. The first fuck didn’t last long, twenty minutes or so, but this one...

“Want me to come?”

He moans softly, pushes back to me, raising his ass to indicate yes.

Good.

My balls are boiling, and thinking of how good this will feel, cumming in a man’s ass, turns me on more. I love the tension, my cock pounding him, his gripping my dick when I jerk away, his ass fighting me, accepting me, every inch, every inch of me feeling welcome. More than welcome. Wanted. I feel wanted.

I relish it.

Love it. Getting closer. I love this, I love this, I love this, I love this, I love me.

I love me?

I scream. I buck into him.

He upgrades his groaning to yelling.

Everything pours out of me, my balls spurting hard, kicking juice through me, into the condom, as deep as I can push it.

He screams.

After-shocks are maddening, my balls, my face, my arms, the sweat, his twitching, a virtual orchestra of sensations, an orchestra collapsed after a single note. The trumpets splaaaaat, and someone accidentally kicks the base drum, knocking over the cymbals. Oh god. Oh god, this feels surreal, him, his squeezing, my cock still fucking, like a conductor who doesn't know when it's time to get off the stage. Stop. I have to stop fucking him.

How did I feel so much energy thirty seconds ago, when right now, nothing but weakness and depletion. I love it.

That condom must be sloppy with my seed, gobs of it.

My softening dick sneaks out, such a change from its bold slams during the last, what, hour? Two short breaks, maybe more than an hour. Alistar can take a pounding, that's for sure.

I slide to the side, reluctantly. My heart pounds a standing ovation.

Wow.

I love sex.

I roll the condom off my dick. I was right. Big load. What do I do with this? Can't easily get to the bathroom. I'll pinch it closed so nothing drips out. Hold it, I guess.

I'm still gasping.

I'm not the only one panting.

He turns with a bashful grin. "I'm completely knackered."

I need to remember every second with Alistair. Maybe we can see each other when he's back from Mexico. I know this is a one night stand and I can't get weird. But I've never fucked like this, so intimate, loving and also raunchy. Maybe this is normal. Not for me. Not this good.

"That was brilliant."

"You were incredible. I loved being inside you."

This leads to more kissing. My poor limp cock refuses to play. Okay, pal. Three orgasms is enough for today. Slow kissing affirms neither one of us feels regret. I had sex! It was amazing!

Halleluiah for cancelled flights.

I love his green eyes, green like a forest fern, and browns like tiny twigs, flecks of gold skimming the surface. Remember these eyes.

Softly, he says, "Eric."

I wince.

"What's wrong?" He raises himself on one elbow. "Eric, what's wrong?"

Why did I lie? After hours of breathtaking intimacy, the beauty we created is undone by my lie, my selfish, stupid lie for no fucking reason whatsoever, no reason. Why the fuck did I lie?

Because.

I don't want to be me.

New York changed me, but I still don't want my shitty life. Say the words quickly.

"I have a confession."

“Hold up, mate. I know you’re inexperienced, so as your shagging mentor, I must inform you, those are the last words any man wants to hear right after sex.”

He smiles in a dreamy way.

I’m going to destroy that smile. He’ll hate me. He showed me his ID so I would trust him, while I lied about my goddamn name. Why didn’t I admit it before we slept together? Damn it, I’m a weird, shitty person.

“Alistair, I don’t know how to explain or justify this. I lied. My real name is Daniel.”

He looks visibly relieved. “We’re using real names?”

What?

“Hello, Daniel. My name is John. John Robertson.”

That can’t be right. I’m meeting—no. No!

“Are you—am I supposed to meet you in Mexico?”

“Yes.”

He smiles and lifts my hand to kiss the underside, right under my thumb.

What the hell? *He lied about his name?*

What the fuck?

My brain explodes in thirty directions, questions, more questions, springing from parent questions, offshoots demanding explanation.

“You’re John Robertson?”

“Alistair is a name I use when I travel on sensitive business.”

“You’re King John?”

Of course he is. He just kissed the underside of my thumb.

“I am. Are you hungry? Probably too late for room service, but not pizza delivery.

Somewhere delivers here, surely.”

I had sex with a king? Was sex with me part of his assignment? Why did they insist on Mexico? What—why didn’t he tell me his name? Despite the multitude, one question slips first.

“What’s your king name?”

Alistair—John says, “That is a very, very good question.”

Did his voice just change?

CHAPTER 11

I smirk, surveying our damage. We wrecked this room the way lovers do. The top sheet is a tangled, crawling across the floor as if trying to escape. Even the fitted sheet is undone, two corners. The blanket remains stuffed over the headboard, where we put it last night to muffle my slamming him from behind. Pizza box, contents devoured. On the breakfast cart, corners of demolished French toast, assorted egg scrambles, mostly eaten, well, as much as we could. With no hesitation, he ordered three breakfasts and extra bacon.

I'm not sure why this impressed me. John's appetite for life, for living is insatiable. *King* John. Even the room's sitting area, where we drank hot tea an hour ago, is spilled sugar packets and tea bags in soggy collapse. Our clothes are scattered. I've never participated in wrecking a hotel room.

I should feel exhausted, but mostly, I feel a weary satisfaction. I picked up Alistair in a hotel bar for sex, and spent the whole night awake with John. Snake men and Michelle. Gold coins. Dancing, dancing, dancing with fire.

From the shower, I hear singing.

I should dress.

For the first time ever, I'm not scrambling to put on pants. I never wanted Eric—or anyone—to witness my legs after sex. Eric had already studied them, but I felt as self-conscious

about them like I do my shriveled penis after sex. Embarrassed it was not strong and virile. Today, I don't fucking care. That's remarkable. John loved me last night, and I loved him. I can admit that. He's a part of me now.

Is it possible to love someone this deeply, recently met? Or, is this infatuation? I have so little experience. This feels like love, the depth of it. Eric was an incredible presence, but that wasn't love. John literally changed my life. I am a better man for hearing his story, for lying naked, eating pizza. Even if emerges naked and screams at me to *get out*, he can't undo my immense gratitude and joy. That sex was mind-bending. The hours afterward, of sexy, King Weekend intimacy...

Was last night as good as it was because it was *king sex*? Is that how Vin Vanbly felt all those years?

Infatuation would be "I want to have sex with him again." I want more. I want to drink in last night, over and over. I want to bless him for a joyful, intimate experience without awkwardness or shame. I want to communicate how much it meant for him not hurrying to be finished with me. I want to call him next week to hear about his day. What he made for dinner. This feeling...

Okay, maybe it's a little bit infatuation. I want to fuck his brains out.

Shower's off. He's still singing.

I save my pants for last, because now, this has become a test to dress at a normal rate. Will I try to hide my pants drama from him? The twisting contortions I go through to coax jeans over my shattered legs? Specially tailored for easier dressing, yes, but it's still not pretty to watch.

Who cares?

Hell, I fucked the dude twice last night. I would have fucked him raw—to complement the intensity—but he insisted on condoms, and I respect his decision. Tops rarely get it, especially when the bottom is undetectable like John. If sex this good is possible—if I can feel so loved and loving through physical intimacy—well, hell, I want more sex. Is this another outcome from New York somehow? From therapy? From his being a king?

I'm curious, oh so curious. And I don't care. I just love basking.

If I plan on being more sexually active, I should consider taking PrEP.

While discussing how he handled his own conversion, he explained some men find their kingship through HIV. For others, the stigma is close to unbearable. What destroys one man is exactly the push another needs. Paths to kingship vary. He told me to look around. See the possibilities.

I'm looking around, John. I'm seeing the possibilities.

My eyes well up with happy tears. I'm becoming a king.

It's unbelievable to consider John once thought himself nothing—worse than nothing because his ordinary self wasn't enough. The man I met, or rather, the *men* I met—Alistair and John both—bubbled with quiet confidence, like too much soda in a full glass of ice. How could a man so fizzy with life ever doubt himself?

The bathroom door opens.

John is naked, drying his hair.

He grins. “Hi, cutie.”

I want to say something playful, something sexy, but I don't know how. I've never had anyone call me *cutie*, not casually, and mean it. The best I can do is beam, grinning my pleasure. Have I ever been this happy? Have I ever felt so special?

Calm down.

This was a beautiful one-night stand. Maybe more. But don't get ahead of yourself. This man owes you nothing. Well, one thing. The next step on my quest.

I don't want to stop hearing about his King Weekend. I want more details. I want him to start over, letting me analyze nuances, moments when I recognized myself in his experience. Aren't I eager to be Alistair most days, someone other than me? Hell, I lied about my name last night.

“What happened with Michelle? You mentioned you two escaped Burning Man—barely.”

“I remain convinced we escaped because she slept through the guard's inspection of the vehicle. They woke her to ensure she was okay. She demanded ice and a soft drink, and when they couldn't deliver, she turned her back and resumed sleeping. Honestly, it was the best thing she could have done. If I had instructed her to do that, she wouldn't have.”

I laugh. I feel like I know her.

“Did you two keep in touch?”

“She's the worst,” he says, drying his cock and balls. “As much a pain in my side as the day we met. I swear, she courts legal trouble, for the sole purpose of pushing my buttons.”

That's not what I was hoping to hear. “I'm sorry. Also, I saw what you did there with *courts* legal trouble.”

He grins sexy at me. “Lawyer puns. Yes, Michelle is terrible. Then again, this is her first business, so she's bound to make mistakes.”

“What business?”

“She designs clothes for gender fluids. She wants to incorporate other designers’ styles, adding her unique spin, which I keep reminding her you simply can’t do—not without getting sued. She claims lawsuits are the best way to get a meeting with other designers. She thinks getting sued is a networking strategy. She’s nutters.”

I laugh without reservation. Beautiful, beautiful Michelle.

John joins me, sitting on the bed. “She had some not-great years. She had to enter a twelve-step program, and she still attends meetings. We fought.” He gets quiet. “Years ago, I was desperate for her to attend college. She insisted it was ‘not her path.’ She wanted to develop her fashion line immediately. Couldn’t wait. Now that she’s getting offers to appear in magazines and meet big-name designers, she wants to go to college. That girl is maddening. Sorry. Woman. That *woman* is maddening.”

“Sounds like a difficult client.”

“I fired her as a client four years ago. No way would I take that level of shit from anyone other than family. So, I adopted her. Officially, she’s my daughter, but my parents and siblings now consider her our youngest sister. Like any bratty baby sister, she’s the absolute worst. You should hear my mom and Michelle fight over football. They’re both sports nuts. Dad and I leave the room.”

He shivers, as if shaking off her mojo. He smiles and takes my hand. “I had fun last night. And all morning, talking with you.”

“Me too. Amazing night.” I’m not ready to ask for a second date. “May I ask something else? Did you see Vin at the next Burning Man?”

“No. He was banned for life. Michelle and I announced her emancipation at a press conference less than twenty-four hours after we left, so Vin got out legal trouble. I was the reason he never got to return. Of course, that hardly mattered after 2005.”

What the fuck happened in 2005?

John grimaces. “Whoops. I forgot I didn’t need to say that.”

“Say what?”

John says, “Here’s the thing about my King Weekend. Vin probably shouldn’t have attempted to king me. I was more than he could handle. He felt attraction for me, had kinged men at Burning Man, so it seemed like a good gamble. But I had too much baggage. I pushed too hard. There are times when Vin simply has to say *no*.”

“But it worked.”

“Yes. I remembered who I was always meant to be. I will always love Vin for taking a ridiculous chance on me. But it almost failed. Until years later, I had no idea how much each kinging took out of him. I didn’t realize. He loves each of us so deeply, so…”

The words trail off.

A pang of jealousy races through me.

I want Vin Vanbly to love me, to believe I’m worth that kind of risk.

It’s hard to admit things, I understand that part of John’s journey all too well. It’s hard to admit you might be nothing, your life a waste. Or, to admit you want things you might never have. I want to to run. I want to be in love. I want to get kinged by Vin Vanbly. I’d be thrilled with any two of those three.

John rises and heads to the closet.

He says, “Daniel, would you accompany me to the lobby? I’ve got to use their business lounge to rebook my flight. I asked Michelle to do it, but experience suggests she didn’t.”

I’m not sure what part of that surprises me more.

“You’re not going to Mexico?”

“No. I have clients in Mexico City, but they aren’t expecting me until next week. As long as we’re in Phoenix, Michelle and I can meet with one of these designers she’s pissed off. See if we can’t settle things amicably. Fly out tonight.”

“Michelle is here?”

John laughs. “Who do you think got grabby about her drink bill at the airport bar? I needed her to make a minor scene—her specialty—so I’d have a reason to initiate conversation with you.”

I barely noticed her—I mean, she was this rich-looking, arrogant...oh wow. I assumed she was older. I can’t remember her face. I briefly met Michelle. This makes me inordinately happy.

“I’m sorry, I’m laughing. I can’t believe I met Michelle.”

“You did. Didn’t require much acting on her part, either.”

John removes a crisp shirt from its hanger.

“I wasn’t exaggerating. My King Weekend took a toll on Vin. Nobody knows what happened to him that night in the desert. It changed him. After that night, he kinged only men who hovered right on the precipice of crossing over. He altered the weekend itself, spending only thirty hours instead of forty, hoping to minimize what he felt was his damaging impact on their lives. He felt cursed. Curiously, he felt overly-blessed, too. The light side of him grew brighter, and the rat side of him got darker. He felt he was being ripped in half.”

I hadn't considered what the kingings might do to Vin. Is that why he stopped in 2005?

"Vin began to doubt himself. He started involving other kings in a kind of screening process, meeting with questing candidates to validate whether the man had strong possibility."

Is that me? A man with strong possibility?

My heart beats faster. Play it cool.

Play it cool.

"When did the other kings begin participating in Vin's kinging?"

"Never. They don't. They just help evaluate candidates. Vin didn't want to involve other kings directly because he understood the consequences. He was unwilling to share that burden with men he still loves with all his love. Daniel, anyone can cross into the kingdom without ever having heard the tale of the Lost and Founds. True, few actually do. It's hard to thread that needle. Most people never get the luxury of a guide, let alone one named in ancient prophecy. The Ghost Who Walks Among Us is an anomaly. At the time, I had no idea how lucky I was."

His words disturb me.

I have always worn *unlucky* around my neck, like Olympic bronze. First runner-up—kids with cancer, and the gold goes to anyone under thirteen who wins an early death. Having your dad run over your legs intentionally—twice—at least earns a spot on the winners' podium. There simply has to be *lucky* and *unlucky*, or else nothing makes sense.

I'm not lucky.

"How do I look?"

John stands before me, charcoal-gray slacks and a mint-blue shirt, perfectly pressed. Shimmering. Shiny black shoes, and his hair fluff-dried and, just...charming. I don't see how anyone could find him ordinary. There's a beautiful *everyman* quality beaming from him,

brighter with each passing minute. He's like peanut butter. Everyone loves seeing peanut butter in the kitchen cabinet.

"Smashing." I immediately redden. "I wasn't making fun of your Englishness, or pretending to be English. It slipped out. I was thinking about Alistair, the man I met last night. He's real to me."

"Me too."

John reaches for my hand.

With one of my canes, I stand. Cross to him. I can't hold hands in any traditional sense, but doesn't seem to notice, wrapping his hand around my forearm. I like him feeling the strength in my arm. No one has ever tried to hold my hand this way. I like it.

"In the years I spent searching for Vin, I thought if I ever did find him and experience his King Weekend, I would brag about it for the rest of my life. Brag to anyone who would listen. I was wrong. Telling my story paints me as an ungrateful, deceptive brat to a man who sacrificed everything. Burning Man was his home. He lost that home because he kinged me. As Alistair, I wasn't very likeable. I tried too hard, and people could tell. Some people, I guess. But I loved Alistair. He's like a distant cousin, a man whose life I once lived. At the same time, being Alistair allowed me to feel superior to others. They were idiots for not seeing through my deception. I will not allow myself to forget the ugliness Alistair represents, even though I miss him. Through our connection, Daniel, I got to visit that part of me last night."

I feel like he's looking at me, expecting something. What?

"Truth can be beautiful or ugly. That's the biggest, fattest question mark. Through which door will you drag your truth?"

He pauses and I don't know what to say.

I'm nervous. Why am I nervous?

“Got everything? Wallet, phone, keys?”

The elevator doors open to the lobby.

Something is not right.

That thing in the room about truth? In the elevator, he again mentioned how selective Vin is these days. What did that mean? My heart sank as we descended. Something is not right.

The lobby is packed with people, most everyone buzzing around the breakfast buffet on the far side. Maybe everyone's flying out this morning. I don't know. My heart beats faster. He wanted me in front of all these people when we said our good-byes. We didn't we kiss before we left the room. Why?

He didn't ask to see me again—and I didn't either. Why not?

Something's up. I feel it.

I try to make my voice sound normal. “What are we doing, John? What's happening?”

With his hand, he indicates a slightly less populated section, near the drop-in couches. Already a half-dozen people chatter there, protective of their luggage. There's nowhere to sit, not together, no privacy, so when we reach that area, we both lean against the backside.

“Daniel, here's how questing works. First we do a phone interview. Yours was with Kearns. Then, an on-site visit. Obviously, you did yours in New York. Vin was on the phone and he followed you in New York.”

“I thought he was in a coma?”

“A *coma*?”

“Everyone’s been saying comments like, ‘In the year, 2005, *everything changed*,’ cue the ominous music. He’s okay? He’s around?”

“Oh, right. That 2005 crap was smoke and mirrors. Sorry. If this were going to happen, we wanted you obsessed by how he changed in 2005. He’s fine. Still lives in St. Paul.”

No, no, no. *If this were going to happen?* They’re already kinging me. I’m already in the middle of it.

“During your on-site, you passed him playing a guitar on one street corner. You didn’t notice him or give him money. No big deal, it’s not always about giving money to the homeless, though you didn’t win any extra points with Perry. You know, the Bolinas Project.”

Don’t panic. Keep my voice calm.

“John, I couldn’t stop for every homeless person. The people behind me would have killed me, the way I move. I would have been knocked to my ass.”

“I know. We get it. None of these were crucial in the final decision, just observations.”

What fucking final decision?

“Vin felt it took you too long to find the Butterfly King. Rance argued it took as long as it was meant to take, given nobody had ever attempted what you did. You impressed Rance. Not only Rance. All of New York clamored on your behalf. Despite what I said about the homeless thing, Perry was always in your corner. You’re from Ohio, like his dad. It was Perry who originally forwarded your apology email to DC. It was DC who suggested, if you took the bait and found another king, then loop in Vin.”

What’s happening?

John studies me. I don’t understand. What is he saying?

“Ultimately, it’s Vin’s decision. He didn’t see himself being able to pull it off. He decided against it.”

“He decided against *what*?”

“Daniel, Vin’s not going to king you. He told me to give you his regrets. Perry, Mai, and half of New York argued on your behalf, so Vin asked me to provide a second opinion. My job was to meet and chat with you. I didn’t know you were going to be handsome and lovely. I didn’t know I would feel so attracted to you. Our connection was very real, even if it was Eric and Alistair ordering drinks at the hotel bar.”

“What opinion did you give Vin?”

My voice is sharp.

John is penitent. I see sorrow in his eyes, but it’s too late. I hate him.

“When you went to the hotel lobby bathroom last night, I gave Vin my thumbs up, but it didn’t change his resolve. I’m sorry.”

“He was here?”

“Yeah. He was on our cancelled flight. He was in the hotel bar last night, too.”

Vin decided—against the opinions of all the other men in The VV—not to king me. He thinks me unworthy. I allow myself to sink against the couch. My hands tremble. I’ll fall. I’ll goddamn fall over.

They aren’t kinging me.

“Hang on.” He reaches into his pocket and then reads his phone. “Text from Michelle.”

My brain reels from the shock. A feeling is growing in me, something very familiar, very dark. My hands are shaking harder, betraying how deeply this hurts.

They aren't kinging me. Vin Vanbly followed me and decided *no*. Because I didn't give money to every homeless person? I took too long to find Rance?

What happens to Lost Kings?

Nothing. Nothing happens. They die alone and broken.

He slips the phone into his jacket's breast pocket. "Michelle says our limo is out front. Ah, there it is."

From our vantage, we see straight through the lobby corridor to the floor-to-ceiling windows, the landscaped turnaround. The passenger window of a white stretch zips down, halfway. Michelle is in there?

I can't believe this. They aren't kinging me.

"Daniel, I'd love a second date, if you're interested. We both have money. We could travel, meet somewhere and continue to learn about each other. Spend a week together."

"You want us *to date*? Seconds after telling me Vin Vanbly rejected me as king material?"

Hold it together. Hold it together in front of this asshole.

"No—don't look at it like that. It's not that you're *not* king material. Every man is. Just...not one of Vin's kings. Look around, Daniel. There are many ways for a man to achieve his kingship. I hinted at that last night and this morning. Yes, it's hard. It can be accomplished. I can't say much about it, or I'll accidentally provide false clues that could derail you."

My heart is pounding. My arms are shaking.

John pulls out his phone again. "Sorry. Michelle keeps texting me to hurry. I have to go. I realize this is a lot to absorb. I'll email you in a day or two, and if you want, we can talk about another date. Please consider it, Daniel. I really like you."

A date? With the man who hand-delivered Vin's rejection and offered his ass as a consolation prize? Was this pity sex? Horror and rage fire through me. *Pity sex*. I got dumped by Vin Vanbly, the one man—according to these mens' goddamn stories—you could trust to like you. Help you.

I need help.

Please, Vin. Please help me!

“Goodbye, Daniel. I loved meeting you.”

He leans in as if he wants to kiss, but I jerk my head back.

Does he honestly believe I'd kiss him now?

John looks sorrowful, and again, I see the startling depths I witnessed last night while he rode my cock, and I felt dazzled to feel such love. He's got stars hidden in his eyes.

Rage and horror curl into a fist inside me.

He says, “I'm truly sorry it turned out this way. Don't forget, every man is the one true king. There are other ways to enter the kingdom.”

I clench my mouth tight. If I speak, I'll scream, “I hate you.”

He pulls out his phone, texting already—*unbelievable*—and strolls toward the white stretch limo. I can't believe this. I cannot fucking believe—

I feel razor-sharp pain stabbing its way up my legs, the jagged tips traveling higher, puncturing my stomach, slashing the air from my lungs. I can't breathe. Is this happening?

Perry wanted to king me.

Mai wanted to king me.

Rance and all of fucking New York vouched for me.

As much as I hate him right now, John wanted to king me.

But Vin Vanbly doesn't want a crippled king. You can watch from the sidelines, but you can't play.

I picture one of those videos where liquid iron is poured into factory molds. I am that molten liquid. I feel a scorching, prickling my skin and making me sweat angry droplets right out of my scalp. I raise my hands before me to witness them vibrating at a speed I could never make happen consciously.

This is rage? This is how fury feels?

All those years I cried out my anger in the garage—wondering how a father could abuse his son—and it was nothing like this. Hell, that was a mild irritation compared to this can't-breathe intensity. Is this how my father felt before he beat the shit out of me? Before he forced pliers into my mouth, threatening to yank out every goddamn tooth?

After all those years, wasted therapy with Margaret. Trying to not be him. It's finally time to accept I am truly my father's son. I am him.

His rage.

His hatred.

Like him, I'm no quitter. I'm not ending my quest to find Vin Vanbly. He's a garage mechanic. John let slip he still lives in St. Paul. I found a fucking butterfly in New York City. I can find this asshole. I thought I might beg him—like John did—to king me.

No.

My skin feels itchy and wet, like it's boiling off my flesh. Hate burns though me like fire, like a volcano, finally releasing it's slow-pouring lava, rage-tears pouring down my face, obliterating every thought, every shred of decency I thought was at my core.

I knew I had a role to play the Lost and Founds. I didn't realize I'm the villain. He and his exclusive pretty boy club—I'd never—

I'll have to get a gun, of course.

On the plus side, I've got my answer. I know what happens to Lost Kings. They become murderers. I'm going to St. Paul, Minnesota. When I find him, I kill him.

I'm the guy who kills Vin Vanbly.