

All Against All

By Nathan Allen

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nathanallen10101@gmail.com

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“The state of men without civil society (which state we may properly call the state of nature) is nothing else but a mere war of all against all.”

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

“You don't have to join a freak show just because the opportunity came along.”

Marge Simpson, “Homerpalooza” (1996)

Chapter 1

A few facts about the animal kingdom:

The majority of conflicts that occur in the wild are not between an animal and its predator. They are more often between two members of the same species.

A low-status chimpanzee has more to fear from a domineering alpha male than a leopard.

Most of the scars and bite marks an animal suffers throughout the course of its life will be caused by an attack from one of its own, rather than a hungry predator.

The apex creature of a species is rewarded with food, mates, status, and the opportunity to pass along its genes.

The weaker of the pack are left to squabble among themselves for their share of the leftovers.

Might is right, and the weakest eat last.

The Soldiers Memorial Hall was a nondescript community center situated on a quiet street in an anonymous pocket of suburbia. The sign out the front announced that tomorrow night was bingo night. The night following, they were host to an over-forties singles dance.

Alice Kato made her way up the front steps, three minutes before the designated starting time.

She pushed the front door open and stepped into the foyer. She was met by a solitary middle-aged woman seated behind a booth. They made eye contact, but the woman's face remained a mask. She offered no welcoming smile, or any other invitation for Alice to approach.

"Um, hi," Alice said, sounding slightly unsure of herself. "I'm here because I was—"

"Invitation."

The woman spoke in a flat monotone.

Alice scrambled to retrieve the invitation from her jacket pocket. She handed it over, and the woman verified its authenticity underneath a fluorescent scanner.

"Turn to your left and face the camera," the woman ordered.

Alice turned and squinted. "I don't see any—"

She was temporarily blinded by an unexpected flash of white light. She blinked a few times in rapid succession. Blobs of color hung in the air in front of her.

Alice never really liked the way she appeared in photographs, but she was certain this would be one of her most cringeworthy.

The booth woman pressed a button, and a door opened behind her. Alice took this as her cue to enter.

The room was a medium-sized auditorium, the type often used for motivational speakers and corporate events. The smell of stale cologne lingered, a hangover from the real estate seminar held there earlier in the day.

About a hundred people were already inside, seated on flimsy plastic chairs arranged in a seashell formation. At first glance Alice could detect no common thread between those in attendance. They were drawn from a range of ages, ethnicities and sociological backgrounds. A low murmur hovered as they chatted quietly among themselves.

A few glanced up at Alice when the door opened, then returned to their invitations resting on their laps once they saw that she was just another of the invited attendees.

Alice self-consciously tiptoed around to the back of the room and settled into an empty seat.

On the stroke of eight p.m., a rear door opened and the Messenger entered.

He was a fortyish man of dark features, dressed in a stylish designer suit that Alice guessed was worth more than her car. He was also unusually tall, at least six foot eight, and had to stoop slightly to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe.

The chatter came to an immediate halt.

One hundred pairs of eyes followed the Messenger as he strode to the front of the room. This scrutiny was not reciprocated; the individual members of the crowd remained invisible to the Messenger.

He took his place behind the lectern. The vacuum of silence was so severe that Alice could hear her own beating heart.

After consulting his notes for one brief moment, the Messenger looked up at the audience. With nothing in the way of introduction or formalities, he launched straight into his spiel.

“If you are here tonight,” he began, “that means you have been selected to take part in a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

His voice was loud, and he spoke with confidence. He could project to the back of the room without the need for amplification.

“Rest assured, my client is not here to sell you anything, nor are they interested in taking your money. What

my client is about to offer is one hundred percent genuine, so pay close attention because I will not repeat myself.”

Alice sat up in her seat. Like everyone else in the room, she had no idea what this was all about. But her curiosity had certainly been piqued.

The Messenger continued.

“On the back of your invitation you will find two contact numbers.”

The ruffling sound of one hundred pieces of paper being turned over swept through the room.

Alice studied the back of her invitation. There were indeed two embossed numbers in the bottom left- and right-hand corners. She hadn’t noticed them before – or if she had, she didn’t think anything of them. Both were five digits long, so she probably assumed they were serial numbers or something similar.

“If you call the number on the left, you will receive two thousand dollars in cash within twenty-four hours.”

Alice shifted her gaze upwards, studying the body language of those seated in front of her. She tried to gauge their reactions. Like them, she expected the Messenger to qualify his statement with terms and conditions. But none were forthcoming.

“If you call the number on the right,” the Messenger said, “your name will be entered into a type of lottery. A sum of money has been placed in a trust, and the total value of that trust, along with any accumulated interest, will be paid out to the lottery’s last surviving member.”

A slight whisper rippled through the crowd. A few nervous laughs escaped. Whatever these people were expecting when they came here tonight, it was safe to assume it wasn’t anything like this.

The Messenger pressed on. “The total value of this trust is one hundred million dollars.”

The next thing Alice heard was the sound of one hundred people devoid of breath.

The Messenger’s words seemed to echo around the room, bouncing off the walls like a ping pong ball.

One.

Hundred.

Million.

Dollars.

She couldn’t see the reaction of any of the other attendees, but she assumed their faces all had the same bewildered expression that she currently wore.

“Now, I understand if you believe this to be some sort of hoax. But let me assure you, this is a genuine offer. There is no catch. There are no conditions. The sum of one hundred million dollars plus interest will be

deposited into the bank account of the last living participant in the lottery, and to that person only. Otherwise, you may accept your two thousand dollar consolation prize. You have until midnight tomorrow to make your decision, at which point the offer expires and you will receive nothing.”

The Messenger turned and headed for the same door in which he entered.

The crowd were so bamboozled by everything they had just seen and heard that a few minutes had passed before anyone noticed he had slipped out of the room without answering any of their questions.

Chapter 2

Three days earlier, Alice woke up to find a plain brown envelope had been slipped under her front door.

The specific details of the invitation were hazy, and the message rather cryptic. It provided a time and a place: eight p.m. Thursday at the Soldiers Memorial Hall on Kent Road. It promised an immediate payment of two thousand dollars just for attending. It stated, unequivocally, that this offer extended only to the person whose name was on the invitation, and the offer would be rescinded if anyone else tried to enter with it.

What the invitation did not do was supply any information as to what the meeting was about, or who was behind it.

It was this sort of vagueness and ambiguity that stimulated Alice's curiosity. Ordinarily she would have tossed the letter straight in the trash. But something in the back of her mind told her this was worth looking into. Part of this was due to the invitation itself. It wasn't a cheap mass-produced piece of junk mail promising some sort of bogus get-rich-quick scheme. It was printed on expensive ivory-colored matte paper, with gold leaf inscription and striking calligraphy. The envelope had been stamped with a hot wax seal. It looked like something one might receive when summoned to dine with royalty. This, and the fact that it had been hand delivered, contributed to the enigma surrounding the document. It had intrigued her enough not to immediately throw it out.

Alice read and reread the invitation several times, searching for the asterisk that pointed to the fine print that revealed the catch behind the offer. But there was none. She put her research skills to use to see if she could dig up any further information, or find out if anything else like this had ever happened before, but her search came up with nothing.

She asked her neighbors if they had also received invitations. None of them had.

Her best guess was that she was being specifically targeted as part of some elaborate viral marketing stunt. If so, the brains behind the campaign or product launch had done their job. Alice's attention, as well as her imagination, had well and truly been captured.

She decided she may as well turn up to see what it was all about. She had nothing to lose, other than another night alone in her drab apartment.

If nothing else, it would provide a temporary reprieve from the crushing monotony that her life had

become.

The one hundred people shuffled out of the Soldiers Memorial Hall with a minimum of fuss. None were entirely sure what they had just witnessed. A few attendees murmured quietly among themselves, but for the most part they were silent.

Alice was one of the last to leave. Along with everyone else, she had no idea what to make of it all. It was such a strange encounter, and one that had ended so abruptly, she began to question whether it really did happen. For all she knew, this could be one big collective hallucination.

While the majority of the crowd returned to their vehicles, a small group of smokers milled around the front steps beneath a single strobing fluorescent light. They engaged in polite chit chat while still remaining cautious – they were all strangers to one another, and no one was really sure who they could trust. For all they knew, the person next to them was in on the joke.

“I bet it’s one of them psychological experiments run by the government,” a moustached man said as he flicked his lighter. “Or a university, like that Milgram experiment. Or the one with all them people pretending to be prisoners.”

“I think a recruitment corporation could be behind it,” a younger woman countered. “Headhunters. You know, like they’re trying to identify potential leaders.”

“And how would they do that exactly?” the moustached man said.

“Because the people who choose to take the money upfront only have a short-term mentality, but the ones that go for the millions are the mavericks who can aim high and can see the bigger picture. Instant gratification verses long-term rewards, and all that. Gamblers verses risk-takers.”

“Gambling and risk are the same thing.”

“No, they’re not,” a younger man in a sharp gray suit interjected. “Gambling is betting on random outcomes. Risk is a calculated venture.”

Alice moved in closer. She surreptitiously activated the voice record function on her APhID to tape the conversation. She wasn’t sure what compelled her to do this. It was probably her journalistic ambitions taking over, documenting the moment in case she needed to refer back to it at some point in the near-future.

She casually leaned up against the stair railing, like she was waiting for a friend to come by to pick her up.

“It’s probably just one of those dumb prank shows they have on TV,” a man with a receding hairline and

ineffective combover suggested. “Someone out there is playing a big joke at our expense.”

He ground his cigarette butt into the pavement with his foot.

“It’s obviously some kind of marketing ploy,” the gray suit said. “They’re trying to sell us something. You go to claim your two grand, the next thing you know you’re handing over your credit card details and being charged three hundred dollars a month to buy whatever it is they’re selling.”

The discussion came to a halt when the hall door opened and the final attendee exited the building.

A morbidly obese man maneuvered his electric wheelchair through the narrow doorway and down the ramp adjacent to the stairs. A respiratory mask covered his mouth and nose, connected to an oxygen tank mounted to the back of his chair.

As he passed, the group saw that both his legs had been amputated at the knee.

They didn’t intentionally make this man the center of attention, but that was what ended up happening.

A few pitying glances were cast in his direction. Others in the group averted their eyes, doing their best not to stare at this gentleman’s unfortunate predicament.

The silence was interrupted when Mike Lever, a burly guy in a trucker cap, removed the crumpled invitation from his back pocket and smoothed it out on his leg.

“What are you doing?” the combover man asked, rolling another cigarette.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m claiming my two big ones.”

A light breeze swept through the night. Alice felt the warm air on her skin, followed by a face full of smoke from the gray suit’s Camel filters. She held her breath to avoid gagging on the pungent stench.

“You mean you’re not going after the hundred million?” the young woman asked with more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“Hey, I have bills to pay,” Mike said. “And with the amount of junk I eat, I’ll be lucky if my heart’s still pumping blood by the end of next week.”

He punched the number into his APhID.

The gray suit let out a dismissive snort. “You don’t *seriously* expect to get any money out of this, do you?”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” Mike said with an easy shrug. “If a wad of cash lands on my front doorstep, at least we know that part of it’s for real.”

He held the APhID to his ear and listened.

There was a soft whirr, and then a click. Next came a brief silence, followed by a dial tone.

“What was it?” the woman said.

“Nothing,” he replied. “It just hung up straight away.”

The combover man smirked and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Not before charging a hundred bucks to your account, I bet.”

Mike Lever’s home was an ugly old weatherboard junker situated in a lower-working class neighborhood on the city’s fringes, sandwiched between abandoned houses with boarded-up windows and overgrown lawns.

He pulled into the driveway and parked his Mazda station wagon in the garage.

That was a waste of time, he thought to himself as he killed the ignition and made his way to the front door. It was late, well beyond eleven p.m. He’d traded his whole night for some pointless seminar, and he had to be up in less than six hours for work tomorrow morning.

The invitation he’d found in his letterbox the other day promised the easiest two thousand dollars he’d ever make. But instead he got ... whatever the hell that was. A marketing stunt? A performance art piece? He suspected the seminar might be a front for Amway or a Ponzi scheme. But not *that*.

It dawned on Mike during his journey home what was really going on here. This was probably the work of some sneaky telemarketing outfit. It was becoming harder and harder for companies to harvest private APhID numbers, so they had to resort to underhanded methods. By making that call to claim his prize, Mike had voluntarily added his number to their database. He could now look forward to invasive and annoying calls interrupting his dinner for the next decade.

He fished around his pocket for his keys as he trudged towards the house, silently cursing his stupidity.

And then he stopped.

Something was waiting for him on his front doorstep.

A solitary package.

He blinked twice to make sure he wasn’t seeing things.

He tiptoed towards it, like it might somehow be dangerous. He knelt down for a closer look.

It was a small gift box.

He looked around to see if anyone was there. He half-expected to find some prankster watching him from the bushes. If so, they remained well hidden. The neighborhood was empty, save for a stray dog roaming the streets, and a couple of young children out riding their bikes far too late for a school night.

Mike lifted the box up. It was light in weight. He removed the lid.

His mouth fell open.

Inside was a thick wad of brand new one hundred dollar bills.

He plucked out a single bill and held it between his thumb and forefinger. It certainly felt genuine – the crisp texture, the ridges, the raised ink.

He held it up to the light. The watermark and embedded thread were both visible. It even had that new money smell.

This money was real.

He did a quick count of the bills. There were twenty in total. Two thousand dollars exactly.

He spluttered out a laugh of astonishment. He couldn't believe this was actually happening to him. Just when he thought this night couldn't get any stranger.

Mike's jovial mood was interrupted when his front door swung open. He quickly stuffed the bills into his back pocket.

Mike's wife looked at him as he stood there with the empty box in his hand.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, a look of fiery irritation painted across her face.

Mike had to think fast. He blurted out the first believable excuse that drifted into his head.

"Out drinking with the boys," he said.

It wasn't the best excuse he'd ever come up with, but his wife seemed to buy it. She shook her head and stormed off, muttering invective under her breath.

A devilish grin broke out on Mike's face. He'd be in the doghouse with the wife for a day or two, but he could put up with that for two grand.

He crumpled up the box and deposited it into the trash on his way inside.

Chapter 3

Hi, my name is Tatiana. I'm a waitress and part-time model, and for the past two weeks I've been dating Brody from Level 1 (the cute one!!!). I have 100's of photos and videos of us together, plus loads of explicit messages that he sent me. Call me if you're interested. I'll tell all for \$10,000.

Two nights ago I met Fawn de Jager (swimsuit model/TV host) at a club. Long story short, she came back to my place where she did enough coke, weed and Xylox to euthanize a rhino. Totally wrecked. In my possession are dozens of incriminating photographs. They can be in your possession for the low, low price of \$1,000 cash. This one-time only offer expires at 5 today. Peace.

My name is Sophie, you might have seen me as a contestant on Diva Fever (I made it thru to the second round). When I was on the show I was romantically involved with the judge Ely Swain (Ely Swine more like it). Two days after I broke it off with him, I was voted off the show. Willing to sell my story for \$15,000-\$20,000, depending on how graphic you want me to get with the details (I should warn you – he's into some pretty kinky stuff).

Alice yawned until her eyes watered. She glanced up at the clock, then immediately regretted doing so. It was only 9:30 a.m. Her day had barely even begun.

Her workspace, one of the many cramped cubicles on the fifth floor of *The Daily Ink* building, was slightly larger than the wooden crates used to transport exotic animals by ship. With so many people in such close proximity to one another, the place was a sweaty petri dish of bacteria and airborne viruses. The floor resembled a human battery farm from above, packed with Shakespeare's monkeys hurrying to file their copy before deadline.

Fridays always dragged the longest, but today seemed particularly tedious.

Alice struggled to summon a single ounce of enthusiasm for her work as she sifted through each of the one

hundred and twelve messages left for her by readers of *The Daily Ink*. Each message was a variation of the same theme – a celebrity (often going by the loosest definition of the term) had allegedly engaged in illicit or immoral conduct, and it now fell on *The Daily Ink* to expose them as the twisted deviants that they were.

Alice's job was to select the stories she believed would appeal most to readers, send them off to the legal department for approval, then churn out fifteen hundred of the most over the top, sensationalized words she could manufacture.

For the most part, those supplying the stories had experienced a fleeting brush with a pseudo-celebrity and were looking for a way of extending that moment for as long as possible. They were also looking for a way of profiting from this fleeting brush.

The Daily Ink may have billed themselves as a news service, but very little of what they published could actually be classified as news. Bawdy gossip was their stock-in-trade, and the main reason why anyone bothered to read it. Their mantra was “trash equals cash”, and since advertising revenue was directly linked to story views, no one was about to take any risks in overestimating the audience's intelligence.

They had amassed a loyal readership who enjoyed nothing more than being outraged and titillated in equal measure by the actions of people they didn't know, and in some cases had never heard of, engaging in activities that didn't affect them.

Alice had worked at *The Daily Ink* for four years now, and every day devoured another small portion of her soul. She started off in an entry-level position in the hope that it would lead to something a little more substantial down the line. She naïvely believed that if she put in the hard yards and paid her dues, she would slowly but surely rise up the ranks within a couple of years, and she would be given the opportunity to tackle more serious subjects. It hadn't quite panned out that way, mostly due to the fact that gossip and fluff made up about two thirds of *The Daily Ink*'s content these days.

She was like a rodent on a hamster wheel, forever expelling a lot of energy without ever really getting anywhere.

Alice opened the next message in the queue, just as a hand landed on her shoulder.

It was a hand that belonged to her boss, Dinah Gold. She knew without looking that it was Dinah standing behind her. She could tell by the firmness of the grip.

Dinah's hand had been lost in a boating accident some years earlier, and she had been fitted with a robotic replacement. It worked just like a normal hand, but every now and then it would need recalibration. Alice felt a tune-up was long overdue; the hand was squeezing her shoulder hard and pinching down on a nerve.

Numbness was rapidly setting in, shooting down the length of her right arm, all the way to the tips of her fingers.

She gritted her teeth and tried not to show any outward signs of discomfort.

“Anything worthwhile in the queue today?” Dinah said.

“Just the usual,” Alice replied. “Another *Diva Fever* contestant accusing Ely Swain of sexual impropriety.”

“Oh dear.” Dinah let out a small laugh. “We ought to send that man some flowers. He really is the gift that keeps on giving.”

She took her hand away, and Alice allowed herself to relax.

“By the way, how did the meeting go last night?”

“Oh ... that.”

Alice remembered that she had briefly mentioned her mysterious invitation to her coworkers a couple of days ago. Dinah was in close proximity at the time and must have overheard her.

She stopped short of divulging too much information. Pins and needles were crippling her right arm, and she didn't want to extend Dinah's drop-by visit any longer than necessary. Besides, there was the possibility that a story – a proper story – existed somewhere in amongst all of this. Dinah had a habit of instantly rejecting Alice's pitches if she didn't find them salacious enough. Alice knew she would have to be a little bit sneaky if this piece was to ever see the light of day.

“It was just something organized by this religious group,” Alice said. “They were trying to entice new members into joining their congregation.”

“I knew there had to be some sort of catch,” Dinah said, shaking her head. “You know how it goes – welcome to our flock, join us in celebrating god's love, here's your two thousand dollars. Now sign here to say you'll donate twenty percent of your weekly income to our church.”

Alice nodded. “Something like that.”

“There are always strings attached, Alice,” Dinah said before she departed. “No such thing as a free lunch.”

Thursday night's meeting lingered in Alice's mind for the remainder of the day, and at seventeen minutes to midnight she found herself sitting on her couch with one eye on the clock, weighing up the pros and cons of each option.

A guaranteed two thousand dollars.

Or an outside chance of winning one hundred million.

She held the invitation in front of her face and reviewed it for the fifty-third time, as if reading it once more would force an obvious choice to leap out at her. But this was no help. If anything, it only added to her confusion.

She still wasn't a hundred percent convinced the offer was legitimate – although she knew the first part of it was. News had filtered back to her that several of the meeting's attendees had elected to take the first option and had already received their two thousand dollars. Alice wasn't broke, but she wasn't rich either. Like most people, she could always do with the extra cash.

So that half of the deal was genuine. Did that mean the other half was, too?

She cast her mind back to the events of the previous night. She was one of the younger people in attendance. Alice was twenty-six; the majority there were in their thirties, forties or fifties. She figured she stood a better than average chance of outliving them all. She was in reasonably good health – she didn't drink or smoke, she ate well, and she made an effort to look after herself. There was no history of serious illness in her family. Her great-grandmother lived until the age of ninety-nine, and she had a great aunt who made it to one hundred and seven. That had to count for something.

Her mother died when she was forty-eight, but that was in a car accident. Her father, to the best of her knowledge, was still alive somewhere.

Alice once had some trouble with prescription medication when she became addicted to Xylox, but that was all under control now. She'd put that brief part of her life behind her, and was confident no lasting damage had been done.

The more she thought about it, the more reasons she kept coming up with to justify choosing option number two.

She figured that she would have many more opportunities throughout her life to make a quick two thousand dollars, but the chance to make a hundred million wouldn't come around again.

From what she was hearing, the majority of last night's attendees were choosing to take the money upfront, putting the odds even greater in her favor.

And, if nothing else, there had to be a good story somewhere in all of this. This bizarre proposition could form the basis of a feature article for her to write. A story so strange that it could only be true. If she'd received an offer like this, there may have been others before her. It could end up becoming an ongoing series of

articles. At any rate, it was better than churning out endless celebrity sex scandals and barely-disguised product placement day after day.

And unlike the majority of what she produced, this story would actually be true.

Everything compelled her to go with the second option. But something still prevented her from actually going ahead and dialing the number.

The clock ticked over to 11:51 p.m. The deadline was nine minutes away. If she didn't make her mind up soon she'd be left with nothing.

She looked at her APhID and willed it ring.

Alice had contacted her brother Lachlan earlier in the day in the hope that he could shed some light on this unusual proposal. Lachlan was older than Alice (by two full weeks), and he was much more worldly than she was. He was always the one she looked to when she needed advice. But he was also notoriously difficult to get in touch with, and he would often disappear and reappear in her life at random intervals.

She had left a message asking him to call her back, but messages could sometimes take days to reach him.

Lachlan was a member of an underground activist network called Discordia, an infamous collective known for their anti-government and anti-corporate pranks. The majority of their stunts were fairly benign, aimed at embarrassing a corporation or exposing their unethical practices. But that all changed when one of their stunts attracted a little more attention than they bargained for.

Discordia had issued a phony (but convincing) press release, stating that the restaurant chain Aqua Bar was under investigation following allegations their meals contained traces of gorilla meat. This, the press release stated, was responsible for a recent tapeworm outbreak among its customers.

The company's share price was sent into free fall for several hours following this announcement, with billions wiped from its share price.

While many dismissed the hoax as a fairly juvenile yet harmless prank, the regulatory body were less than impressed by what they considered illegal stock market manipulation. Aqua Bar were even less amused, and placed pressure on the police force to punish those responsible.

Aqua Bar just happened to be one of the major sponsors of the police force, and so they did as they were told.

They quickly swooped in and arrested Lukas Ormsby, one of Discordia's founding members. He was

thrown into solitary confinement, denied access to visitors and legal representation, and held without charge for months on end.

The situation quickly escalated when Discordia carried out a citizen's arrest of their own. They staged the audacious kidnapping of Emilia Ulbricht, the twenty year old daughter of billionaire media mogul Ethan Ulbricht, whose AFX Entertainment Group was another of the force's major sponsors. They announced they would be holding Emilia without charge in a confined space at an undisclosed location, and would allow her no contact with the outside world. In other words, she would be afforded the exact same rights that Lukas Ormsby presently had – deprived of her liberty for no discernible justification, and with no date set for release.

The two sides were now locked in an ugly stalemate. Discordia announced that the police could end this farce simply by upholding Lukas's civil rights and releasing him from custody, and they in turn would release Emilia. The police refused, claiming this would amount to "caving in to terrorists".

At present, the situation showed no sign of resolution. Lachlan, as well as all other members of Discordia, was considered a fugitive of the law. He faced immediate arrest, and had been forced into hiding for the past three months.

Three minutes to midnight came around, and Alice decided that Lachlan was unlikely to be calling her any time soon. A decision about the lottery had to be made, and if she couldn't do it herself she would have to rely on the fate of the universe to do it for her.

She fished a coin out from her pocket and flipped it into the air.

Chapter 4

HE WHO DIES LAST WINS

By Alice Kato

The location: an innocuous community hall on a quiet suburban street.

The time: eight p.m. on a warm Thursday night.

In attendance: one hundred complete strangers, selected at random.

The reason: unclear.

Three days earlier, gold leaf-embossed invitations were hand-delivered to a range of civilians who, on the surface, appeared to have little in common. The details were vague, the motives unclear and, for the most part, the recipients were confused.

What they did manage to glean was that an unusual offer was being put to them: show up to the given location at the given time and collect a guaranteed two thousand dollars. In cash. Tax-free. No questions asked. No strings attached.

Little did they know that, as peculiar as this offer may have appeared, things were about to get a whole lot weirder.

Alice had only just settled in to work on her article when she heard a knock at the door.

It was late, approaching midnight. The interruption annoyed her more than it alarmed her, as it had disrupted her momentum. She was hoping to get the bulk of her story completed tonight so she could submit it to the editors by the end of the week. She had to make productive use of her time too, since she was only permitted to work on these kinds of stories after hours. *The Daily Ink* paid her to turn out nothing but D-grade celebrity junk stories for eight hours a day. Dinah considered anything else a waste of time.

Alice rose from her seat and looked through the door's peep hole. There was no one out there. She opened the door a crack and peered down the hallway. It was empty.

A large brown package sat on the floor in front of the door. "Alice Kato" was scrawled across the top in black marker pen.

She quickly gathered up the package and carried it inside.

She placed it on her dining room table and, after examining it for a minute or two, sliced through the string and brown paper wrapping with a pair of scissors.

Inside was a box. She opened the flaps at the top and found a letter.

It read:

Meet the contestants.

Congratulations! If you are reading this, you are one of the twenty-seven lucky contenders who have chosen to take part in our lottery. The sum of \$100 million (plus interest) will be paid to the last surviving contestant only. Participation in this lottery is not transferable or redeemable.

Good luck!

Beneath the letter she found a stack of color photographs, similar to modeling headshots. Alice flipped through them one by one.

The first was of a thirtyish blonde woman. A mini-biography on the back identified her as Mia Gordon. It stated that Mia was a thirty-seven year old divorcée with no children who worked as a legal secretary. Her home address, work address, APhID number and more had also been supplied.

The second photograph was a man by the name of Christopher Gibson. Alice recognized him immediately – he was the heavysset wheelchair-bound gentleman she encountered the night of the meeting. Christopher was forty-one, single and unemployed.

The package contained twenty-seven profiles in total. The last one belonged to Alice.

The photograph was the one taken in the foyer prior to the meeting. Just as she suspected, it was awful. Even worse than the one on her passport, but at least that was the size of a postage stamp, and had only ever been seen by a handful of people. The one she was looking at was an unflattering eight by ten shot showing her squinting into the light. Every bump and blemish on her face had been magnified.

The flip side divulged all her personal details:

Name: Alice Olivia Kato.

Date of birth: 8 August, 2040

Citizen identification number: 41-946-162-915

Marital status: Unmarried

Children: 0

Home address: 1204/550 Hickory Crescent, Rivercliff

Occupation: Journalist

Employer: *The Daily Ink*

Employer address: Level 5, 1 Pharaoh Parade, Amherst

Aurora Phone Interconnect Device (APhID) number: 1010 1802 3095

Alice had no idea where they had sourced all her personal details from. She certainly hadn't given any of this information out. Now she knew everything about the other participants in the lottery, and they knew everything about her.

But she still didn't know who was responsible for the lottery, or the motivations behind it.

An involuntary shudder rippled through Alice's body. Something about this just didn't sit right.

"You have some explaining to do, Ms. Kato."

This remark from Dinah, moments after she had summoned Alice to her office, was designed to unnerve her. But Alice saw through it, and she refused to take the bait. She did her best to convey a kind of blasé nonchalance.

"What have I done now?" Alice replied as coolly as she could manage.

Her boss slid a couple of pages of text across the desk, then tapped on it twice with her knuckle.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?" Dinah said.

Alice leaned forward and glanced at the document. It was the article she had submitted a week ago; the bizarre story of the \$100 million proposition put to a group of random strangers.

"That's something I've been working on," Alice said. "I told you about it. Last Thursday? You said it would be okay if I worked on it in my spare time."

None of this was actually true. But Dinah's memory was like a sieve, and anything Alice told her typically flew in one ear and out the other. Alice figured she was on pretty safe ground with that lie.

"Where did you hear about this?" Dinah said.

"The lottery?"

“Yes, the lottery.”

“I heard about it from a source.”

“Does this source have a name?”

“Sure, all my sources have names.”

Dinah waited for more, but Alice only gave her a cocky half-smile.

Dinah rapped her robotic fingers across the surface of her pinewood desk. Alice tried not to stare at the mechanical appendage, which was difficult when Dinah seemed to be constantly drawing attention to it. The hand was so lifelike, which paradoxically made it creepier in appearance.

She was making a real effort to intimidate Alice. Her confrontational body language, the accusatory tone of her voice – it was Dinah’s way of letting Alice know who was in charge here.

“Well, who was it?” Dinah said.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t. But it’s solid.”

Even though Alice found this exchange to be a little intimidating, she couldn’t deny that it gave her just the tiniest thrill. Her first serious article had seen her hauled into her boss’s office and grilled over the credibility of her sources. She must have been doing something right. That sort of thing never happened when she was a gossip writer.

She wondered if this would become a regular thing in her new role of investigative reporter; shaking up the system, arguing with her boss in her dogged pursuit of the truth, debating *The Daily Ink*’s commercial interests versus the public’s right to know, and so on.

“This is not a game, Alice,” Dinah said. “This is serious.”

“Look, I don’t know what the problem is. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Alice thought she knew what the problem was: Dinah didn’t believe the story. What she wrote was so outlandish and far-fetched that it could only be a work of fiction. She had prepared herself for this to happen.

But she wasn’t prepared for what Dinah said next.

“I want you to bury this.”

This statement almost propelled Alice out of her chair. “What?!”

Dinah pushed the document back towards her. “Shred it, delete the file. Throw away your computer if you have to. Just pretend you never wrote or heard about any of this.”

Alice's jaw fell open. "You can't be serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"This story could be huge!"

"I know. That's why you're being asked to bury it."

"But why?"

"Because I told you to."

Alice could barely believe what she was hearing. She could feel the heat rising to her face.

"I'm not your ten year old daughter, Dinah. I want a proper explanation as to why you won't publish this, and I'm not leaving this office until you give me one."

Alice sat back and folded her arms. She wondered if maybe she pushed it a bit too far with that last comment. But it was too late now. She'd said it, and she couldn't take it back. All she could do was maintain a poker face and hope Dinah didn't fire her.

Dinah was silent for a moment, then rose from her seat. She closed the door to her office.

She sat back down and took a deep breath.

"Alice, this was not my decision," Dinah said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "This is a directive that comes from above."

Alice screwed her face up. "What does that mean, from above?"

"I mean, from someone higher up. *Much* higher than I'm used to dealing with." Dinah exhaled and rubbed her eyes. "High enough to know that I shouldn't ask any questions."

A charged silence filled the room, as Alice allowed this information to sink in.

"I don't know who it was or why they ordered this," Dinah continued. "But somebody got wind of the article and told me in no uncertain terms that it had to disappear, and that you were not to write anything further on the subject."

"I know the story might seem a bit implausible," Alice said, trying not to let her desperation become too obvious. "But I guarantee you, every word of what I wrote in there is true. Nothing was made up."

"I don't doubt that for a second," Dinah replied. "In fact, I know it's more than likely to be true."

"You do?"

"You know what *The Daily Ink* is like, Alice. We publish ridiculous, made-up crap all the time. If a story gets killed it's usually for one of two reasons."

Dinah counted out the reasons, extending a robotic finger on each point.

“One, the story is fabricated and it’s potentially libelous. Or two, the story is true but it’s too dangerous for publication.”

She reached across and picked the pages up off the desk.

“I’ve read your article a number of times, and I don’t see anything in here to suggest it could be libelous.”

Alice slumped back in her chair and expelled a dramatic sigh. She had worked so hard on this story, and now it would all be for naught. She was certain it would be big news. Stories this good didn’t just fall into your lap.

This was meant to be the breakthrough that would fast-track her career and give her something more substantial to write about. Now it was being suppressed by some faceless and spineless management drone.

“I don’t know how you managed to do it, Kato,” Dinah said, shaking her head. “But you’ve freaked out some very powerful people. And me.”

It was only now that Alice saw how much she had misjudged Dinah’s mood when she first entered her office. Dinah wasn’t angry. She was badly shaken up.

As unpleasant and uncomfortable as this meeting may have been for Alice, it was nothing compared to what Dinah had probably just endured with her superiors.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

She collected her article and rose from her seat.

“Alice ...” Dinah’s words caught in her mouth. She cleared her throat. “You’re ... you’re not mixed up in any of this, are you?”

Alice stopped. “How do you mean?”

“I mean ... with what you wrote about. The lottery, and all that. You’re not personally involved, right?”

Alice hesitated before answering. She could have told Dinah the truth, since what she did in her own time was none of her business. But after witnessing Dinah’s reaction to the article, Alice thought it would be best if Dinah didn’t know that she was also one of the contestants.

“No, of course not,” Alice said. “It’s just something I heard about from a friend of a friend. I’ve been looking into it in my spare time.”

“That’s good.” Dinah leaned back in her chair and forced a smile. “I didn’t think you would be. I was just making sure.”

“Well, thanks. I appreciate your concern.”

“And look, I’m not saying you can’t branch out every now and again. I know writing tabloid hatchet jobs

five days a week isn't anyone's idea of a dream job. Just ...”

Dinah paused. Alice could tell she was taking great care in selecting her words.

“Tread carefully. Sometimes, the truth is a hell of a lot more dangerous than fiction.”

Chapter 5

Alice was hardly surprised by the way her story had been killed without justification. She wasn't sure which of *The Daily Ink*'s advertisers had taken issue with her piece, or what part of it they found so objectionable, but she was certain they were the ones behind this directive. The first thing a contributor learned upon commencing work at *The Daily Ink* was that it was the marketing department, not the editorial board, that dictated content.

Despite its slogan of "All The News You Need", *The Daily Ink* conducted very little in the way of actual investigative reporting (it also continued to call itself *The Daily Ink*, despite the fact that they no longer used ink after newspapers ceased publication almost forty years ago). Its basic purpose was to act as an astroturfing venture for Solomon Turner, currently the world's tenth richest person. The journalists he employed were given one clear edict: produce content in line with Turner's business interests, and nothing else.

Solomon Turner's present net worth stood at approximately \$890 billion. His wealth had risen rapidly over the last three decades, although he was given a significant head start when he took control of his ninety billion dollar trust fund at the age of twenty-one. His paternal grandfather was the founder of Aqua Bar, the popular health food franchise currently valued at over eleven trillion dollars. His maternal grandfather was Bernard Marlowe, a crooked millionaire businessman turned even-more-crooked billionaire politician.

As is often the case, wealth is acquired via an accident of birth, and the easiest way to become rich was to be born into a rich family.

He liked to describe himself as self-made, and he flew into a rage whenever anyone referred to him as an heir, but Solomon Turner was born with more than just a silver spoon in his mouth. He was gifted the entire cutlery set.

Solomon joined the family business shortly after college, then rose up the ranks to become Aqua Bar's CEO in his late twenties. He gained prominence when he successfully increased profits by over seventy percent in his first year in the job, a feat accomplished mostly through slashing wages and workforce conditions rather than product innovations or new marketing strategies. For this, he gifted himself a nine-figure salary and exceedingly generous bonuses.

This set the pattern for the years to come, where Solomon would periodically ransack the family's businesses and treat them like his own personal ATM.

Solomon's appetite for power increased in line with his net worth. In his mind, it was axiomatic that the more money one had, the greater influence they should wield on society. He was more entitled to rule than those with less money. Rich people boasted a higher intelligence, and so they knew what was best for everyone.

This was believed to have been his motive for purchasing *The Daily Ink*, the struggling news and media service that his grandfather Bernard Marlowe was once editor, at the age of thirty-four. He had made it his life's mission to control the news, and he simply couldn't resist the allure of owning his own media outlet.

His first order of business was to ditch anything that resembled real news and replace it with mindless entertainment. He knew readers preferred to consume trash to distract them from anything happening in the real world, and that capturing the attention of those with the lowest IQs was a virtual license to print money.

His second order of business was to rebuild the news division in his own image, where it would become little more than the propaganda arm for his own interests. Many stories that appeared in *The Daily Ink* were simply regurgitated press releases from Solomon's other business ventures.

These changes may have been responsible for making the world a significantly more stupid place, but they also transformed his empire into a perpetual motion money-making machine. His wealth ballooned at an exponential rate, to the point where he now boasted more power and influence than many world leaders.

Success didn't come without its drawbacks, though. He had three failed marriages to his name, and was currently working on the fourth. He was notoriously litigious; he was constantly in and out of courts to sue people into submission, deploying his phalanx of lawyers to clog up the legal system and settle his own personal vendettas.

More often than not, these battles were waged against members of his own family. The Turners were forever squabbling over money. Solomon had been successfully sued by his twin sister Clea over a dispute regarding their grandparents' inheritance. He later sued Fabian Turner – his own father – for control of Aqua Bar. His latest and nastiest court battle was with his daughter, who had accused him of misappropriation of funds with regards to the trust that had been set up in her name.

Despite the public's fascination with their soap opera-esque twists and turns, it came as little surprise that none of Solomon Turner's personal dramas ever made it into *The Daily Ink*.

Alice chose to spend the remainder of her workday in a kind of adolescent sulk. She carried on with her job of

sifting through the growing pile of messages from model-slash-actresses, duplicitous drug dealers, and other assorted gold diggers and fame-chasers. All assured her that they had the scoop of the century, and it could be hers for the right price.

But she was in such a resentful mood that she simply deleted each message after giving it a cursory glance.

She was now operating purely on spite, still fuming over the callous way in which her story had been killed. It was on days like this that she questioned the direction her life was heading. This wasn't the life she envisioned for herself when she took on this job. She yearned to do something important; something that would make a difference. She had accepted the job of writing trash because she viewed it as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. But four years on, and despite the many hours of hard work she had invested, she was yet to advance one solitary rung on the ladder. Her career hadn't just flatlined; it had actually backslided.

She dreamed of leaving *The Daily Ink* and writing serious news, but that was never going to happen until she produced something worthwhile. The story about the lottery was meant to be her ticket to bigger and better things, but it had been snatched away from her at the last minute.

She feared she was doomed to write the same trashy stories about misbehaving quasi-celebrities for the rest of eternity, like some sort of purgatorial punishment.

Two hours and ninety-three deleted messages later, at the point where she had reached her lowest ebb, the following appeared on her screen:

A memory stick has been taped to the bottom of the park bench on the south-east corner of Wyatt Street and Pharaoh Place. On this you will find footage of a police officer engaging in illegal behavior with an associate of Goliath's.

Regards, Needlemouse.

Alice dismissed the message as a reflex action, then quickly scrambled to retrieve it.

She read through it again. It took a second for the contents to sink in, and for Alice to comprehend just what she was looking at. Whatever she was expecting to find whilst sifting through these messages today, it certainly wasn't anything like this.

There were two things that jumped out at her. The first was that the sender, someone going by the pseudonym "Needlemouse", was not asking for any money – unlike every other message that had ever arrived via these channels.

But there was one other factor that set it apart from all other messages. One single word that caught her eye and made her sit up and take notice.

That word was Goliath.

The saga of Goliath was like something pulled from an outlandish crime drama. Five years ago, this mysterious overlord emerged, seemingly from out of nowhere, and quickly conquered the city. He ran drug, gambling and prostitution rings, bankrolled heists, and was rumored to be involved in dog fighting and organ trafficking. He dealt with anyone who stood in his way in the most cold-blooded and vicious manner imaginable. His targets included police, politicians, rival gangs, civilians, and two journalists from *The Daily Ink* who came a bit too close to revealing his true identity.

One such person was Ricardo Ferguson, a senior investigative reporter at *The Daily Ink*. He had been tracking Goliath for months, believing he was close to unmasking him. That was until one morning, when he didn't show up for work.

His body was found two weeks later in the front seat of his car.

His head was discovered in the trunk. Perfectly preserved in a jar of formaldehyde.

This kind of shocking brutality did little to diminish Goliath's burgeoning celebrity. If anything, his reputation was enhanced. His mysterious persona, his ruthless methods of operation, his rapid ascent to power, and the fact that his identity had never been verified had morphed into an ongoing soap opera. *The Daily Ink* led the charge in all of this, and seemed to have no problem in fueling the myth and notoriety of the man responsible for the murder of two members of their own staff. This was largely due to the fact that Goliath was ratings gold, and every piece surrounding his brutal exploits sent *The Daily Ink*'s circulation skyrocketing. As it always had, advertising revenue trumped ethics. It was not uncommon for *The Daily Ink* to feature Goliath-related stories every day for weeks on end.

Even though they had an aversion to serious news that bordered on the pathological, an exception was made for Goliath. He had grown to become a household name, more famous than the models and socialites that soiled their pages on a daily basis.

With *The Daily Ink*'s help, Goliath had become an antihero for the ages.

The park bench on the corner of Wyatt Street and Pharaoh Place was a mere three blocks from *The Daily Ink*'s headquarters, but it may as well have been located in another country. Even though it was the middle of the day, Alice didn't feel at all safe.

She found herself deep in xombie territory.

"Xombie" was the derogatory term given to the grimy street rats hopelessly hooked on drugs – specifically, the prescription medication Xylox. The general public treated xombies with utter contempt and regarded them as the lowest form of human life. Their debilitating addictions had turned them into grotesque, deformed creatures with skin the color of rotting citrus and a smell to match.

Xombies were much, much worse than regular junkies. They had reached a point where their addiction controlled every aspect of their lives. Scoring a Xylox hit was the only thing that mattered to them, and when a craving struck there was nothing they wouldn't do to get their hands on some more.

This armpit of the city was thick with xombies, rendering it off-limits for normals. This was an area that anyone would avoid if even the slightest amount of common sense resided within them. Muggings and assaults were an everyday occurrence in these xombie ghettos, even in broad daylight.

Most frustrating of all for Alice, three xombies had taken up residence on her park bench.

They were nothing more than skin and bones, like three shrink-wrapped reanimated skeletons. They huddled around a single glass pipe, vaporizing their stash of pills and sucking in the toxic fumes.

Alice stood back and observed from a safe distance, hoping they might move along soon. But it quickly became apparent they were only just settling in for the day. As soon as their first chemical cluster had been incinerated and inhaled, the pipe was restocked and round two commenced.

Alice knew she would be waiting all day if they kept this up. She had to get rid of them, and knew of only one thing xombies would chase more than Xylox.

She moved upwind from the park bench, then discreetly dropped a handful of small bills on the ground.

A moment later, the wind picked up the loose notes and blew them past the xombies. The three addicts immediately pounced up and chased after the money like kittens pursuing a butterfly.

Even though she had just tossed away a small chunk of her daily earnings, Alice convinced herself that she had performed a valuable community service. That one act meant an innocent civilian wouldn't be getting robbed on their way home tonight, or someone's house wouldn't get broken into. It would be her good deed for the day.

She swooped in on the bench as soon as they were out of sight. She ran her hand along the underside, her

fingers moving over the bits of splintered wood and hardened lumps of chewing gum. Alice grimaced, and tried not to think about the cornucopia of germs and bacteria she was exposing herself to.

Her hand then landed on a small piece of plastic, taped to the bottom.

An electrical charge shot through the entire length of her body. She had no idea what this stick contained, and for all she knew someone was playing an elaborate practical joke at her expense. But by that point she didn't care. It had been years since she'd experienced this level of excitement in her job.

She left a message for Dinah, informing her that she was leaving work for the day after being struck down by a mystery illness, then rushed back to her apartment.

She pulled out the antique notebook computer she kept in a box of knickknacks at the back of her closet. She had only used the notebook once or twice in her life, but any journalist worth their salt had one of these stashed somewhere for moments just like this. Memory sticks may have been phased out decades ago, but they remained a popular old-school way of passing around information when the sender wanted to avoid leaving a digital fingerprint.

She jammed the memory stick into the port at the back and opened the file.

Needlemouse had promised footage depicting a police officer engaging in illegal behavior with a known criminal. It most certainly did that. The picture and sound quality were crystal clear, and showed the uniformed officer handing over two packages of counterfeit Xylox in exchange for an envelope stuffed full of cash. The officer was easily identifiable, with both his face and badge fully visible. The two packages were clearly labeled as police evidence. The officer could even be heard cracking a joke about selling the dealer his own confiscated drugs back to him.

Alice could hardly believe what she was seeing. After years of producing "news" of zero consequence, mostly involving celebrity cheating scandals and public intoxication, the biggest story of the year had fallen out of the clear blue sky and into her lap.

Her next six hours were spent working without a break to produce five thousand explosive words on what she had witnessed. Never mind the article about the mystery lottery – *this* would be the story that propelled her into the big time. The fallout was bound to be huge, and the implications set to rocket through all levels of the police force.

Alice was revising her fifth draft when something caught her attention out the corner of her eye.

A small brown envelope had materialized on the floor, over by the front door. She had no idea how long it had been sitting there. She had only just noticed it. It seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere.

She set her work aside and went over to pick it up.

She used the lid of her pen to tear the envelope open. Inside, she found a simple light blue piece of card. She flipped it over and saw a photograph of a woman in her thirties with green eyes and a bright smile.

It was a face she recognized. Her name was Naomi Duke, and she was one of the contestants in the lottery. Alice recalled seeing the same photograph as part of the package she received last week.

Written across the photograph, in large red font, was one simple word.

“ELIMINATED”.

Chapter 6

Naomi Duke's funeral was a quiet and sombre affair. This was to be expected when one died so young, so suddenly, and under such inexplicable circumstances.

Alice observed the proceedings from afar. She didn't know if it was inappropriate to turn up to a stranger's funeral like this, but something compelled her to come. She made an effort to be as unobtrusive as possible, watching on respectfully as her coffin was carried to its final resting place.

The ceremony was cloaked in silence as Naomi's mortal remains were lowered into the ground. The only audible noise came from the passing traffic in the near-distance, and the omnipresent hum of the surveillance crafts hovering in the sky one hundred meters overhead. They were a bitter reminder of what many believed to be the cause Naomi's tragic demise.

Twelve years ago, the city councilors' never-ending quest to privatize public space reached its logical conclusion when they hit upon the idea of leasing out large chunks of the sky for commercial purposes. To them, it was unfathomable that this vast natural resource existed and yet no one had figured out a way of making money from it. The councilors quickly moved to rectify this oversight, then rewarded themselves with hefty bonuses for initiating this previously untapped revenue stream.

This led to numerous private operators launching permanent surveillance crafts above the city and charging a fee to view the captured footage. Their biggest clients were security firms and the police force, who used the images to track suspects and assist in criminal investigations. But this service was available to everyone, from overprotective parents and jealous spouses, through to weirdos and voyeurs who simply enjoyed watching anonymous people go about their daily lives.

On this particular day, Alice counted five surveillance crafts in the immediate area. Some of the more populous parts of the city could host as many as thirty, floating in the sky like mechanical jellyfish.

Five days ago, Naomi Duke was found dead by the side of the road. The top of her head bore a gaping wound. A pool of blood stained the cement surrounding her body.

The cause of death was recorded as major head trauma. A chunk of metal the size of a bar of soap was found a few feet away. An early theory was that a component from a surveillance craft had dislodged, and Naomi had the terrible misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. A freak accident, they said.

Something no one could have possibly seen coming.

ASE Industries, the company responsible for operating the surveillance crafts in the area where Naomi's body was found, strongly disputed these claims and denied any culpability.

Alice was so preoccupied with the lingering crafts floating ever-present above her, and their alleged role in today's events, she hadn't noticed that the mourners had begun to disperse. She suddenly felt exposed, like she had been caught out doing something she shouldn't. She did her best to regain her composure.

But she was thrown when she looked across and saw a man staring straight back at her.

He stood on the other side of the cemetery, flanked by two towering stone crucifixes. There was no mistaking it; his gaze was fixed solely on her.

A feeling of severe guilt came over her, like she was a teenager caught shoplifting. She worried this man was about to confront her and demand to know why she had turned up to this funeral uninvited.

But the second the stranger's eyes met her own, he looked away. He kept his head low, his gaze now firmly on his feet. All of a sudden he seemed like the guilty party.

Alice thought he looked somewhat familiar. The more she watched him, the more certain she was that she knew him from somewhere. Had they met before? Maybe he lived in her neighborhood.

A gust of wind blew. The man's hair stood straight up, and his combover was revealed.

A random name floated into Alice's mind: *Carson Dowling*.

The man's name was Carson Dowling. She knew his name, but nothing else. How was that possible?

For the next minute her mind raced through every conceivable scenario as to how she knew him. Was he a friend of a friend? One of her teachers from school? Had she seen him on TV or in *The Daily Ink*? For the life of her, she couldn't figure it out.

And then it dawned on her.

She knew his name because she had seen it alongside his photograph. And she had encountered him once before, standing near the front steps of the community hall a couple of weeks back. He was the guy rolling his own cigarettes and suggesting they were being filmed as part of a prank TV show.

Carson Dowling was one of the twenty-seven lottery contestants.

No sooner had Alice realized this, more contestants came into view. There was Vicki Malseed, the petite brunette lingering self-consciously over by the petunias.

Then there was Bourke Nation, the guy in the designer sunglasses and stylish gray suit, mingling with the other mourners and trying to look as if he belonged there.

The more she looked, the more familiar faces she spotted. They had been there all along, but only now had they come into focus. Like one of those optical illusions that fools your brain into failing to see objects that are right in front of you.

There were maybe eight or ten in total, and they were all there for the same reason she was.

They were looking for answers.

There was a slight degree of awkwardness immediately following the funeral when the contestants all realized they had been caught out gatecrashing. But after a period of stilted and reluctant small talk, they decided it would be best if they went somewhere to discuss what had happened.

They converged on the nearest bar, two streets across from the cemetery. It took a couple of drinks for everyone to loosen up (except for Alice, who chose a non-alcoholic beverage), but it wasn't long before they all spilled what was on their minds.

"The police said it was just a freak accident," said Morgan Compston, a guy with the look of an unemployed computer programmer – glasses, greasy ponytail, and a complexion that suggested he was allergic to sunlight. "They have no reason to believe anything sinister might have occurred."

"Of course they're going to say that," Carson Dowling replied in his cigarette-scratched voice. "They don't know what we know. A freak accident is one thing, but a freak accident *days* after the lottery commenced? You have to admit, that looks more than a bit suspicious."

There were a few murmurs of agreement.

Alice didn't want to believe it, but she conceded that Carson was probably right. Her journalistic instincts – if she could describe what she did as "journalism" – told her there was unlikely to be smoke without fire.

"So you think she might have been killed by someone in the lottery?" asked Vicki Malseed, the softly-spoken brunette.

"If I was in charge of the investigation, that'd be the first place I'd look," Bourke Nation said. "See who would benefit the most from her death and take it from there."

An awkward lull followed, as the group's eyes darted suspiciously from person to person. Accusatory looks were tossed around like a grenade with the pin pulled out.

Alice was first to break the silence. "If Naomi was killed – and that's a big 'if', we have no proof yet to suggest otherwise – obviously it's not going to be any of us. No one would murder someone and then show up

to their funeral.”

“A psychopath would,” Bourke replied. “That’s plausible.”

He drained the rest of his vodka, then gestured to the bartender for a refill.

“It’s also plausible that a small piece of metal came loose from a surveillance craft and Naomi suffered from the worst luck,” Alice said.

“Do I have to be the one to state the obvious?” Carson said. “You don’t think that maybe that big tattooed guy – Roque Fenton is his name – that maybe he was somehow behind this?”

Right away, they all knew who Carson was referring to. Roque Fenton’s photograph jumped out at them the moment they saw it in the package. Everything about him screamed “violent ex-con”, from his shaved head to his facial tattoos, to a neck that was twice as thick as his head, to the numerous knife scars adorning his cheek.

If science ever successfully spliced human and pit bull DNA, Roque Fenton would be the result. This guy was like a walking sack of bricks.

“You think he might be a killer based on his appearance?” Vicki said

“No, I think he might be a killer based on his appearance *and* his extensive criminal record,” Carson said.

The group immediately fell silent.

Carson leaned back and took a sip of his drink. He enjoyed having the group’s undivided attention for once.

“My sister-in-law is on the force,” he continued, “and she looked into him for me. I had her look into all of you, in fact. And out of everyone in the lottery, Roque Fenton is the one that concerns me the most.”

“Wait, you’ve been snooping in on our private business?” Bourke said, his indignation rising.

“His name is pronounced *Rocky*, not *Roke*,” Morgan said quietly.

Carson ignored them both. “This guy has done time in prison. He has convictions for breaking and entering, car theft, drug possession and receiving stolen property.”

“That doesn’t necessarily make him a killer,” Morgan reasoned. “It’s not like he’s been arrested for violent crimes – aggravated assault, attempted murder, or anything like that.”

“Hey, if he’s willing to break into someone’s home to steal a few thousand dollars worth of property, imagine what he’d do for a hundred million,” Carson said. “Roque Fenton looks like someone who’d kill for a lot less.”

Alice shook her head. “That doesn’t prove anything, Carson. You can’t convict someone on the basis that

they look the scariest.”

“Balls to that,” Carson said with a dismissive snort. “This isn’t a court of law, and I don’t have to prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt. I’m just pointing out the facts. And the facts state that we have one person dead, Roque Fenton is the prime suspect, and everyone here would be wise to get decent security upgrades for your homes.”

Chapter 7

Alice was the first of the group to leave the bar, right around the time Carson Dowling and Bourke Nation began dominating the discussion to the exclusion of all others. The two of them duked it out for the title of head gorilla, thumping their chests in a macho display of strength and bravado.

Bourke let it be known that he wouldn't hesitate to bump off any other contestant if he thought they were going to get to him first, a statement Alice believed did nothing to ease anyone's anxiety with regards to their present situation.

Carson, meanwhile, had already decided Roque Fenton was guilty of murder, and embarked on a long-winded rant about why he needed to be stopped before it was too late. He suggested that everyone arm themselves with weapons and confront Roque as a group to let him know he was being watched.

This was the point where Alice decided to leave. Bourke and Carson were both drinking heavily, their voices rising in line with their blood alcohol content. Alice considered their behavior quite inappropriate given that they had just come from a funeral. When the barflies who had been drowning their sorrows since ten a.m. started shooting sideways glances in their direction, that was a good sign that it was time to leave.

The fact that the bar was a haven for bacteria, with sticky dust- and ash-covered surfaces that hadn't been wiped down since the mid-fifties, also played a part in her decision to depart.

She slipped away quietly, making her getaway before she could be recruited into the Carson Dowling Neighborhood Militia.

She thought she had managed to escape without anyone noticing, but a minute later she heard the clacking of heels on concrete as someone hurried to catch up with her.

"Alice!" she heard a voice cry out.

She turned and saw Vicki Malseed rushing towards her.

"Are you leaving?"

Alice nodded. "It was getting a bit too rowdy in there for my liking."

"I know what you mean." Vicki took a moment to catch her breath. "Is it okay if I walk with you?"

"Sure."

It took only a couple of minutes of casual conversation for Alice to diagnose Vicki as a chronic worrier.

She may have been only seven years Alice's senior, but Vicki seemed strangely old-fashioned, almost middle-aged. A sixty year old stuck in a thirty-three year old body.

"It's such a terrible thing to have happened to that poor woman," Vicki said. "I haven't been able to sleep since I heard the news. It could have been any one of us."

"I don't think we have anything to worry about just yet," Alice told her.

"You don't?"

"I spoke with one of the crime reporters at my work. He assured me that everything about this case points to a terrible accident. No foul play, nothing sinister suspected at all."

Vicki shook her head. "I don't know why I put my name down for that stupid lottery. I did it on a whim. I figured I'd forget all about it, and then in fifty years' time I'd find out I'd won and have all this money to share with my grandchildren. I didn't think anyone would die within the first week."

Alice thought Vicki actually *did* have grandchildren when she first said this, before realizing she was speaking in hypothetical terms.

"Maybe that'll still happen," Alice said. "Naomi's death was just an anomaly. If she'd died a month earlier, before any of this had started, none of us would have given it a second thought."

"Still, you don't know what other people are capable of, do you?" Vicki fidgeted nervously with the locket around her neck. "What would they be willing to do for a hundred million dollars? You and I probably wouldn't kill anyone for any amount of money, but there are people out there who would. I know it's wrong to judge someone based on their appearance, but I'm afraid Carson might be right about Roque Fenton. He looks like he might be dangerous."

"All we have so far is one death," Alice reminded her. "It's pointless to waste time worrying about something that hasn't happened yet."

"What about that poor man in the wheelchair? The one with no legs. Christopher, I think his name was. If someone wanted to get to him, he wouldn't stand a chance."

Alice let out a silent sigh. Vicki seemed like a nice enough person, but she got the impression she was someone who worried that the sun might not rise tomorrow morning.

"Vicki, the odds of someone going around murdering every other person in the lottery *and getting away with it* are so statistically improbable that it's not even worth discussing."

"How do you mean?"

"Think about it. One person killing twenty-six without the police catching them first? That's never going to

happen. About eighty-five percent of murderers are apprehended within the first forty-eight hours. And with the sophistication of today's forensic technology, along with the volume of surveillance the police have at their disposal, unsolved murders are exceptionally rare. There's like five or six *a year*. You might be able to get away with one or two, *if* you're extremely careful and smart – and Roque Fenton doesn't appear to be either – but there's no way anyone could possibly get away with twenty-six.”

Alice wasn't one hundred percent certain about the veracity of her figures. She thought she heard something like this on one of those true crime documentaries, and they sounded about right. Cold cases these days were virtually non-existent.

Regardless of their accuracy, Vicki seemed comforted by this knowledge.

They chatted some more as they walked – about Vicki's job, about the weather, about her pet Jack Russell terrier. Alice continued to probe Vicki with polite questions, doing her best to steer the conversation away from anything too unpleasant.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the front of Vicki's apartment building.

“Thank you so much for everything.” Vicki pulled Alice in for a tight hug. “I know can overreact sometimes. I think I just needed someone to talk to.”

Alice smiled. “Hey, no problem. It's a strange time for all of us.”

“Here.” Vicki rummaged through her purse for a pen. “I'll give you my number.”

Alice held up her hand. “There's no need.”

“If you want to meet up again. You know, for coffee or something.”

“I mean, I already have your number. We all have each others' numbers. They came in that package they gave us.”

“Oh, of course.” Vicki let out a chirpy laugh, then hugged Alice once more.

The two parted ways, moments before Alice's own APhID lit up with an incoming call.

She looked at the screen. It displayed a string of garbled text. Someone was calling her through a scrambler, trying to mask their whereabouts.

She answered.

“Hey, it's me.”

She heard Lachlan's voice. It was slightly disguised – it was filtered through a manipulation device – but she could tell it was him.

“I just got your message,” he said. “Is everything okay?”

After all that had happened over the past few days – the lottery, the drama with her rejected article, the footage from the memory stick, and Naomi’s sudden death – it had completely slipped Alice’s mind that she had left a message for her brother, asking him to call her back.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “I just needed your advice about something. Actually, it’s not really that important anymore.”

“Okay. Cool.”

A drawn-out pause followed. Ten seconds in, and the conversation had already hit a wall. Neither one wanted to discuss the elephant in the room that was Lachlan’s present status as a fugitive.

Alice leaned up against the front of the building. “So ... whereabouts are you?”

“I’m ... I can’t really talk about that right now.”

“Are you, uh, planning on finishing up that, um, *project* you’re currently working on anytime soon?”

Another pause.

“I really can’t discuss that either. Not right now. Sorry.”

This was how most calls played out between Alice and Lachlan these days. Lachlan was in hiding, wanted for his role in Emilia Ulbricht’s kidnapping, and so they could only ever converse using general terms.

Every call made anywhere in the world was monitored by automated bots, and certain words and phrases were programmed to trigger red flags. Even saying Lachlan’s name in conversation, or using keywords like “kidnapping” or “Discordia”, would be enough to attract unwanted attention.

Suspicious calls were immediately traced, and the conversation sent to law enforcement officials for further analysis.

“Hey, I might–”

A truck roared past, and Lachlan’s words were drowned out by the noise.

“What?” Alice jammed a finger in her ear. “I didn’t catch that last bit.”

“I said I might be around your way sometime soon. We should catch up then.”

“Sure, that sounds–”

The line dropped out, and the call abruptly ended. Their allocated thirty seconds – roughly the amount of time it took for a call to be traced – had expired.

An appropriate ending, Alice thought, considering the way Lachlan dropped in and out of her life with arbitrary frequency. He certainly took after their father in that respect.

She put her APhID away, then stepped away from the curb to cross the road.

Alice tried to think back to the last time she had seen Lachlan. It would have been months ago. Many months. Maybe even a year.

Her relationship with her brother had been unconventional right from the start, but that was to be expected given that they were half-siblings born two weeks apart. They grew up on opposite sides of the city, each enduring childhoods where stability was in short supply. Both were raised by single mothers. Very occasionally, there was a father who made fleeting cameo appearances in their lives. Their paths crossed only on very rare occasions growing up, and it was only in the last few years that they really connected with one another.

More than ten years had passed since either one had any contact with their father. This suited them just fine.

As adults, Alice and Lachlan's lives couldn't have become any more divergent. Lachlan got to have all the fun and adventure with his Discordia pals, gallivanting around the world and living like a band of vagabonds. He never devoted a great deal of thought to his own future. He was like water; always finding the easiest route through life.

Alice was his polar opposite. If a friend had to describe her in one word, it would be sensible. Alice wore sensible clothes and shoes, and had a sensible haircut. She worked a sensible job, ate sensible meals, drove a sensible car and went to bed at a sensible hour. She was resigned to her sensible life, each day a sensible facsimile of the one before it.

Now it was time to return to her sensible home.

She had taken one step out onto the road when she was startled by a sudden loud noise behind her.

It was a kind of a slap and a crunch. Like the sound of an open palm striking bare skin, combined with a heavy boot crushing a soda can. But many times louder. It was a sound unlike anything she had heard before, and one she would never fully be able to erase from her memory.

What happened next played out in slow motion.

A piercing shriek rang out. It came from a woman on the opposite side of the road. She looked straight at Alice, screeching at the top of her lungs as if possessed by demons.

To her left, a few feet away, an elderly woman walking her chihuahua was overcome by a case of spontaneous hysteria and collapsed to the ground.

Chaos infected the area at the speed of sound. Several people ran towards Alice. She saw the terror reflected in their eyes. Others ran away.

She turned to look behind her.

Subconsciously, she knew what she was about to see. She didn't want to look, but it was almost as if she was forced by an unseen hand. Like she no longer had control over her own actions.

A crumpled body lay in a heap, in the exact spot Alice had stood less than five seconds earlier.

A grotesque mess of twisted limbs, surrounded by a fast-forming puddle of blood. A shattered body that had plummeted from a great height, until it came to an abrupt stop when it collided with the pavement.

Whoever this was – or whoever it used to be – they would not be immediately identifiable.

But even without looking, Alice knew who it was.

OFFICER FILMED IN DRUGS STING

The Daily Ink

5 September, 2065

A senior police officer has been caught red-handed selling illicit drugs back to the dealer they were confiscated from.

Hidden camera footage obtained by The Daily Ink shows Officer Eric Brook, a respected veteran with over twenty years' service, handing five large packages of counterfeit Xylox to a known drug dealer. In exchange for the "lemon drops", he receives an envelope bulging with cash.

Each package appears to contain approximately ten thousand pills with a combined street value of more than \$200,000.

Officer Brook and the dealer, whose identity was obscured in the footage, appear to enjoy a relaxed and friendly rapport, which has led to speculation they may have been involved in this sort of activity for a period of time. The officer can even be heard joking that their transaction was "like stealing a new pair of shoes, then returning them to the store the next day for a refund".

The damning footage has cast doubt over the integrity of the police force, which has been mired in numerous corruption scandals in recent years. An anonymous source within the force has claimed that this sort of behaviour was commonplace, and in some cases even encouraged.

The police force's two major corporate sponsors, the AFX Entertainment Group and the Aqua Bar restaurant chain, did not respond to our request for comment.

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Chapter 8

A stream of froth shot out as Dinah Gold popped open the bottle of champagne. “I think it’s time for a celebration!” she declared.

She poured two glasses; one for herself and one for Alice.

Alice noticed that Dinah had inadvertently snapped the top off the bottle rather than pop the cork. This was another troubling sign that Dinah’s robotic hand was in urgent need of servicing.

“This bottle of 2054 vintage Dom Perignon comes courtesy of Mr. Solomon Turner himself,” Dinah said. She flashed a wide smile that gave the impression of a dozen extra teeth. “To congratulate us for our outstanding work!”

Alice caught the scent of the champagne as Dinah handed her the glass. It had a fragrance of roses and money.

Dinah raised her glass in the air. “Here’s to a great double act.”

This abrupt change of heart hadn’t gone unnoticed by Alice. For as long as they had worked together, Dinah had shot down every one of Alice’s story pitches if they fell outside her narrow area of expertise. It was only last week that Alice was being hauled over the coals for stepping outside the bounds of her role as a lowly desk lackey. Now Dinah was acting as if this was her idea all along.

But Alice could hardly blame Dinah for wanting to claim a slice of the credit. The fallout from her story on the corrupt police official and the illicit drug deal had been extraordinary. By some estimates, more than forty percent of the population viewed the story on the day of publication, and *The Daily Ink* received its best numbers in more than a decade.

The officer depicted in the footage was arrested and charged less than an hour after the story broke. The force was plunged into damage control, with chief commissioner Maximilian Yu ordering a full-scale corruption inquiry.

It was the scoop of a lifetime, and everything Alice had always dreamed of. She had been elevated to the role of office celebrity over the past couple of days; the junior copywriter who had somehow stumbled across the story of the year. She was dizzy from the roller coaster ride of attention and acclaim.

Yet despite the triumph, she was having trouble enjoying any of it. The events from the past week were still

fresh in her mind.

Two deaths, Naomi and Vicki, so close together.

She struggled to keep her mind focused on her work. No matter what she did to try to block it out, the image of Vicki's body lying on the sidewalk, minutes after she last spoke to her, replayed over and over.

Despite the official line, Alice couldn't shake the feeling that these two tragedies were somehow linked.

The police maintained that Naomi Duke's death was an accident, most likely the result of a malfunctioning surveillance craft, and there was nothing to suggest anything untoward had occurred. Oddly enough, any potentially incriminating footage from surrounding surveillance crafts was unavailable due to what the operators described as "unforeseen technical issues".

They were still investigating the circumstances surrounding Vicki's shock death, but for now they were going on the theory that it was all a terrible accident. Vicki appeared to have slipped on a wet surface inside her home and fell into the railing on her balcony. The railing gave way, and she plummeted twenty-one stories to her death. Foul play could not be ruled out at this stage, but they were yet to find any evidence to support such a notion.

Alice provided a brief statement to police, telling them she walked home with Vicki after Naomi's funeral, although she wasn't entirely forthcoming with her information. She neglected to tell them about the lottery, or that the last thing Vicki talked about was how she feared for her life. She didn't know why she chose to withhold these details. Maybe she didn't think it was relevant. Or maybe if she did, that would be like confessing to her own culpability.

She had become mildly obsessed with both Naomi and Vicki over the past few days. She sought out as much information as she could about these two women and the bizarre circumstances in which they both died, poring over every last detail. She didn't know what she was looking for exactly. A clue, maybe. Some sort of evidence that would lead to a logical explanation as to how this could have happened.

It wasn't so much the two sudden deaths that bothered her. It was the sheer incomprehensibility of them both. She needed to locate some sort of order in amongst all the chaos.

There was a brief silence in the room, and Alice suddenly became aware that Dinah had stopped talking. Worse, Dinah now had an expectant look on her face, like she had asked a question and was awaiting Alice's response.

"Uh, sure," Alice said, smiling and nodding her head. She hoped this was what Dinah wanted to hear.

"Absolutely, of course."

“That’s great,” Dinah replied, pouring herself a second glass of champagne. “If you keep producing work of this standard, you can expect to see your opportunities expand in the coming year.”

Alice continued to smile and nod, a gesture that usually answered most questions in life. She pretended to take a sip of her champagne, then emptied her glass into a pot plant when Dinah’s back was turned.

“This is your moment, Alice,” Dinah said after finishing her second glass in two sips. “Enjoy it.”

Dinah then handed Alice her first ever bonus check.

The Daily Ink didn’t make a habit of paying its staff any more than they absolutely had to, but a bonus system had been introduced a few years back with the aim of incentivizing its workforce. If a story attracted a certain number of views, the employee would receive a commensurate amount of the generated advertising revenue.

These bonuses usually only amounted to a few extra dollars here and there. Enough for a meal at a reasonably-priced restaurant. Nothing to get too excited about.

And so Alice did all she could to keep her cool when she saw that she was being paid the equivalent of six weeks’ wages for something that had taken her half a day to write.

The rest of her day was spent enveloped in a kind of daze. This all felt like a dream – a peculiar, acid-strength dairy-fueled dream, complete with bizarre wish fulfillment, an absence of logic, and inexplicable non sequiturs. Her career was taking off in the most unexpected of ways, just as these strange events were happening all around her. This almost felt like it was happening to someone else, and she was watching it all unfold from afar.

Mid-afternoon, a message appeared on her screen. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw who it was from.

Alice,

Congratulations on a job well done.

There’ll be plenty more where that came from. If you are smart and do as I say, I think you and I could enjoy a mutually beneficial working relationship.

I’ll be in touch,

Needlemouse.

Alice thought she may have had trouble sleeping after all she had been through these past few days, but she was so worn out and run down that she managed to let go of consciousness almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. She sunk into a deep slumber, until a heavy pounding noise invaded her dreams shortly after two a.m.

She fell out of bed, disoriented. It took her a moment to pull herself together.

She threw on some clothes and crept over to the front door.

The pounding increased in intensity.

She peered through the peep hole and relaxed when she saw it was Carson Dowling. The guy from Naomi's funeral. The one who came across as a bit of a self-important blowhard, but seemed mostly harmless.

"Carson?" she said.

"Alice?" he said through the door. "Are you awake?"

"No Carson, I'm talking to you in my sleep."

"Please, you have to let me in."

Alice could hear the panic in his voice.

She wondered how he knew where she lived, until she remembered the package they all received containing everyone's personal details.

She opened the door up a crack.

"What are you doing here, Carson? Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Carson didn't wait to be invited in. He pushed the door open and forced his way inside.

"Carson?" Alice asked again. "What are you doing? What's going on?"

Carson prowled around her apartment like a caged animal. He seemed like a completely different person from the last time Alice saw him. The self-aggrandizing aspiring vigilante from earlier had vanished. In its place was a chaotic bundle of hyper nerves, panic-stricken and delusional. His face was wet with perspiration, his combover sticking to his scalp like a halo. Alice feared he may have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"I need your help," he said. "I need somewhere to hide out."

He rushed over to the window to check for any signs of activity. The streets below were empty, but this did little to soothe his fractured state of mind.

"They're coming after me, I know it," he muttered to himself. "They control everything."

Alice rubbed her eyes, still not fully alert. She pinched the skin on her arm several times to confirm that she actually was awake.

“You’re kind of freaking me out here, Carson,” she said.

Alice couldn’t tell what had come over him. It could be drugs. It could be something worse.

She took a few discreet steps in the direction of her kitchen. This was where all her sharp knives and her meat tenderizer were within arm’s reach, should she need to defend herself. She didn’t think Carson would attack her. But the way he was behaving, she couldn’t say for sure.

Her bleary eyes came into focus a minute later, and Alice really began to worry.

Carson’s hands were covered in blood.

His clothing was smudged with dark patches and stains. His face bore a smattering of crimson droplets.

A bloodied screwdriver was gripped tightly inside the palm of Carson’s right hand.

“Jesus, Carson,” Alice whispered. She took another step back. “What have you done?”

Carson wouldn’t – or couldn’t – answer. He sobbed quietly in the corner of the room, rocking back and forth on the spot, fidgeting like it was an involuntary tic.

The apartment was deathly silent, save for the staccato clicking of Carson’s chattering teeth.

Alice remained in the opposite corner, as far away from Carson as she could get without physically leaving the room. She watched and waited, immobilized by helplessness. She had no idea how she was supposed to react in a situation like this.

Another brown envelope then flicked under the doorway, and the pieces of the puzzle all fell into place.

Alice knew exactly what had happened. She knew what Carson had done, and she knew who he had done it to.

The envelope on the floor contained the card to announce that Roque Fenton had been eliminated from the lottery. Given the evidence before her, Alice could only assume it was Carson who had carried out the eliminating.

She tried to imagine the sheer force of will required to kill another human being – one the size of Roque Fenton – using nothing but a screwdriver.

Carson spotted the envelope. He ran across the room and threw open the front door.

“Leave me alone, you maniacs!” he shouted into the empty hallway. “I want out of this! You hear me? I’m out! I don’t want to be a part of your stupid game any more!”

Alice rushed over and pulled him back inside. She slammed the door closed and locked it.

“You need to calm down,” she said, although this was something she was also telling herself. “Just breathe. Try to relax. I know your emotions are running high, but we can work this out.”

“But ... he’s dead,” Carson said in between sniffs and gasps for breath. “I killed him.”

“In self defense, though. He came at you first.”

Alice waited for Carson to confirm her words, but this only made him sob harder.

“That was what happened. Right? Roque Fenton *did* come at you first, didn’t he?”

“I had to do it,” Carson finally said.

“Right. Because he attacked you.”

Alice hoped that if she repeated this assertion enough times, it would eventually become the truth.

“I had to do it,” Carson said. “If I didn’t do it, he would have killed me. He would have killed *all* of us until he got to the money.”

Alice felt her insides implode like a controlled demolition. That was the moment she knew there was little she could do to help Carson. There was nothing justifiable about any of this. It was an open and shut case of premeditated murder. Extreme paranoia and a preemptive strike were unlikely to hold up as suitable defenses in a court of law.

She wanted to offer Carson support. Something to soothe his torment. But words failed her.

Ninety seconds later, the police were pounding on Alice’s door.

“Jesus!” Carson said. “How did they find me?”

If Carson had been thinking straight, it wouldn’t have been all that difficult to figure out. His arrival had generated enough noise to wake up the entire floor. The trail of blood leading to Alice’s door was also something of a giveaway.

“You try and stall them!” he said. “I’ll climb out through the fire escape.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Carson. It’ll only make you look guilty.”

It was actually the murder weapon in Carson’s possession, along with the victim’s blood on his hands, that made him look guilty. But logical thinking had deserted Alice by that point of the night.

“I think it’s best if you surrender,” she said. “I’ll tell the police what happened. I’ll explain everything. The lottery, the threats, the other people being killed. The others will back me up.”

Alice knew she was grasping at straws. She knew that, in all likelihood, Carson would be imprisoned for the remainder of his natural life.

But that all became irrelevant when Alice’s door was kicked off its hinges, and Carson’s natural life only lasted another eight seconds.

Carson charged at an officer with the bloodied screwdriver in his hand.

The officer drew his weapon and fired.

Alice dived for cover.

Carson was struck in the torso, and he became the fourth contestant eliminated from the lottery.

In the few days since Alice had last seen him, Carson's life had descended into hell. He had been bombarded night and day with threatening calls. Mysterious figures were spotted around his house at all hours of the night. The tires on his car were slashed. Bricks were thrown through his windows. His family were terrified.

He contacted the police and told them who he believed was responsible, but they were unable to arrest Roque Fenton without any evidence.

The final straw came when he woke up that morning and found a dozen dead rats hanging from his front porch. Stuffed inside his mailbox was a photograph of Carson, taken without his knowledge. A bull's eye had been painted across his head in blood.

That was all it took for Carson to snap.

Chapter 9

More than thirty years had passed since the firearms prohibition had been introduced. While a small number of crude homemade weapons still circulated throughout the various criminal networks, all other forms of firearms had been removed from the streets and destroyed. Possession of a prohibited weapon was a criminal offense, punishable by mandatory ten-year prison sentences.

The OBL-IV was the only gun still in regular use anywhere in society. These were used solely by the police and armed forces, and were vastly superior to the antiquated weapons that utilized bullets and gunpowder. The technology deployed in the development of the OBL-IV was much more sophisticated, and as a result it was many times safer.

Rather than shooting bullets, the OBL-IV fired a concentrated burst of nuclear-level energy at the intended target. This produced a much more powerful and destructive result; a single shot could blow a hole in a man the size of his head.

Suffice to say, anyone who suffered the misfortune of being shot in the head would not require an open casket at their funeral.

The OBL-IV was fitted with digital crosshairs and an automatic aim function. An officer could lock in on a specific target and strike with a higher than ninety-nine percent accuracy, even if that target was moving or a great distance away. The risk of innocent civilians being caught in the crossfire was significantly reduced.

However, the most important feature was that each individual weapon could only be fired by one person. The biometric technology incorporated into the weapon's handle was matched to the palm print of the officer or soldier assigned to the OBL-IV, and the weapon could only be fired in that person's hand. If an OBL-IV was stolen or lost in the field of battle, it would become utterly useless to anyone else; nothing more than an expensive lump of plastic and fiberglass.

The interview room at the police station smelled of disinfectant and stale coffee.

Alice sat with her arms folded tight around her. Her hands were damp and clammy. Her eyes remained fixed on the corner of the room.

She was in no mood to speak with Detective Olszewski, or anyone else for that matter. She could feel her life unraveling, spiraling out of control before her very eyes. She'd been exposed to an unnatural level of violence in the past forty-eight hours, and the cumulative trauma was beginning to take its toll.

How would she ever expunge those disturbing images from her head? They were there waiting for her whenever she closed her eyes. She would see Vicki lying on the sidewalk in a crumpled heap, like a bug squashed on a truck's windshield. She would see Carson with a gaping hole in his torso the size of a watermelon.

"Alice." Detective Olszewski attempted once more to get her to speak. "I'm trying to help you here. I can see you're in some sort of trouble. But you need to talk to me. I can't do anything if you won't tell me what's wrong."

"I'm not saying anything without a lawyer," Alice said.

She had no idea if this was the correct thing to say, or if the detective could force her to talk regardless. That was just something a law student friend of hers had once said: you should never open your mouth around a cop without a lawyer present. She'd also heard people say it in movies.

"You don't need a lawyer," Detective Olszewski patiently explained. "You're not under arrest, and you're not a suspect."

Alice offered half a shrug, then returned her gaze to the corner of the room.

There was a minute of silence. The only sound now was the low hum of the fluorescent lights hanging overhead.

Olszewski removed her glasses. She wiped a smudge from one of the lenses. This was going to be a long night.

"Look, Alice, I know you're not a killer." Olszewski spoke in a softer voice. "Or in any way a criminal. That much is obvious. But something strange is clearly going on here. There's something you're not telling us. Four people have died within the last seven days, and we can connect you in some way to each of the victims."

Olszewski counted the victims off on her fingers.

There was Naomi Duke. Alice had attended her funeral, two days earlier.

There was Victoria Malseed. Alice was the last known person to see her alive, shortly before she fell from the balcony of her twenty-first floor apartment.

There was Roque Fenton. His suspected murderer fled to Alice's apartment immediately after leaving the scene of the crime.

And there was Carson Dowling. The aforementioned murder suspect, shot dead by police in Alice's apartment just a few hours ago.

"I don't know what's going on here, or what you've got yourself mixed up in," Olszewski continued. "But if you are in any sort of danger, you need to let us know. We can help you."

Alice looked up. She made eye contact for the first time.

There was something about Detective Olszewski that told Alice she could trust her. She was in her early thirties, not that much older than Alice. She had a look about her that conveyed both toughness and empathy; that she was someone who had the constitution to handle grizzly murder scenes without losing sight of the fact the victims were human beings.

Alice could come clean and tell her the truth. But would anyone believe a word of it? Then again, she didn't have much of a choice. People around her were dropping like flies. Her life expectancy had shrunk dramatically over the past few days.

She took a deep breath.

The story spilled out of Alice in a tsunami of jumbled words. She told Detective Olszewski everything, right from the start. She told her about the mysterious invitation she had received, the meeting she attended at the community center, the offer of the cash or a place in the lottery, and the ensuing chaos that had consumed her life ever since. She told her how she feared for her life – four participants in the lottery had died within the space of a week, and for all she knew she was next in line.

Detective Olszewski listened closely without interruption. She took a few notes as Alice spoke, but for the most part remained bereft of emotion.

When Alice had finished, Olszewski leaned back in her chair and let out a desperate sigh.

"Oh boy," was all she said in response.

Alice waited for more. She expected Olszewski to laugh at her, or order her to undergo psychiatric evaluation. But instead she just stared at her desk for what felt like eons.

"I'm sorry," Olszewski finally said, rubbing her tired eyes. "I'm afraid there's not a whole lot we can do for you."

Alice was caught off-guard. This was not the response she had anticipated.

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"I mean there's nothing we can do here. Thank you for your cooperation. You're free to go."

Alice had a half-confused half-amused look on her face, like she had just been told the punchline to a joke.

she didn't quite understand.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes, I heard it all. You were offered the chance to take part in a tontine, and now people are being killed left, right and center. It's not the first time we've heard it, either. We heard it all four years ago, when the last tontine took place."

A shiver rippled through Alice's body. The taste of sickness flooded her mouth.

"You ... you mean this isn't the first time something like this has happened?"

Olszewski shook her head. "There have been several previous lotteries. That we're aware of."

Alice waited for elaboration. None was forthcoming.

"So what happened? What did you do?"

"What could we do?" Olszewski said with a shrug. "We sat on our hands and waited until everyone was dead. Then we filed our reports. Then we drank heavily and tried to forget everything we had just been through."

"But ... couldn't you arrest anyone?"

"For what? Tontines – the agreement you've just described, it's called a tontine. As long as all the participants enter into it voluntarily, and in the end the winner is paid the promised amount, they're completely legal in this free society of ours."

"Is *murder* legal?"

"No, but the minute we start investigating one murder, the prime suspect turns up dead a week or two later. The main suspect from *that* murder is then killed, and so on and so forth until the whole thing plays itself out. Fear and paranoia spreads like an incurable virus. We've found the easiest thing to do is to just hang back and wait for the contest to run its course, and hope that no innocent bystanders get caught in the crossfire."

This revelation had rendered Alice momentarily speechless. None of it seemed real. The absurdity of the situation felt like one big joke at her expense.

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"The best we can do is advise you to be vigilant, and call us as soon as you see or hear anything suspicious." Detective Olszewski plucked a card from the holder on her desk and handed it to Alice. "And keep a low profile. From what we've observed, it's the ones who draw attention to themselves that get bumped off first."

Alice buried her head in her hands. These last couple of days were like being trapped inside a never-

ending anxiety dream. She thought she could rely on the police to protect her. If they were no help, what hope did she have?

The way Detective Olszewski had described it, it was only a matter of time before the remaining twenty-three contestants succumbed to their base instincts and started plotting ways to wipe each other out, all in the hope of becoming rich beyond their wildest dreams.

After all, everyone has their price. Most just don't know what it is yet.

Alice braced herself for the worst when her key slid into the front door of her apartment. She expected to be confronted with the gruesome aftermath of the previous night's carnage. She prepared to see her white walls displaying the fresh stains of blood splatter, and was resigned to the fact that her vacuum cleaner would be sucking up bits and pieces of Carson for months to come.

So it was a pleasant surprise when she opened the door and found her home in near-pristine condition. The place was nothing less than immaculate. A neutral observer would never guess that a large proportion of a man's digestive tract had spilled out here only hours earlier.

The carpet was spotless. The walls were so dazzlingly white and bright they looked freshly painted. Her front door had been replaced, and it now opened and closed without sticking to the frame, which it would occasionally do during periods of high humidity. Her furniture had been rearranged in such a way to give the impression of a more spacious living area. There was even the delightful aroma of baked bread wafting through the air. Alice's only disappointment came when she realized the smell originated from a can of air freshener, and that the police had not actually baked her any bread.

Alice may have been a neurotic germophobe and fastidious neat-freak, but even she had not been able to achieve this level of cleanliness. She really had to give those crime scene clean-up crews their due.

The mood was dampened somewhat when she discovered the brown envelope that had been slipped under her front door. In all the chaos from the past twenty-four hours, she had momentarily forgotten how this whole episode had started.

She opened it up. Inside was a card with "ELIMINATED" stamped across Carson's face.

She pinned the card up on her wall, alongside the other three. She had them arranged in chronological order; a kind of timeline of death.

She wasn't quite sure why she started doing this. Maybe she thought these people deserved to be

remembered in some way, and not discarded from memory a week or two after their departure.

She stood there for a moment and looked at the cards. Naomi, Vicki, Roque and Carson. Four people dead within the space of seven days.

There were twenty-seven contestants in total. She didn't know how long the lottery was going to last when she first signed up, but she assumed something like fifty or sixty years. If the contestants continued dropping off at the present rate, the whole thing would be over within a couple of months. It wouldn't be long before a card announcing her own elimination was being slipped under strangers' doors.

Alice was in way over her head, and she knew it.

It dawned on her just how exposed she was. She never really felt like her life was in danger, but that was because no one had any reason to want to kill her. It was only now, when she assessed her surroundings, that she realized it wouldn't be particularly difficult for anyone to get to her. Something had to be done.

Beefing up security around her apartment was her number one priority. So the next day, she had a locksmith come around to install a new set of locks on her door. She had extra locks put on the windows too, for good measure. It was unlikely that anyone would scale twelve floors to break into her apartment from the outside, but she wasn't prepared to leave anything to chance.

She was supposed to obtain her landlord's permission before making any alterations to the place, but at that moment forfeiting her bond was the furthest thing from her mind.

She traveled to her nearest electronics store and bought up big in their home security section. She purchased two alarms for the apartment, a personal alarm for herself, a distress horn, and a dozen miniature security cameras.

On her way home, she dropped into a sporting goods store and purchased a new baseball bat.

The wireless security cameras were shaped like small ornaments. They were tiny and easily concealed, about the size of an ice cube, and perfect for her needs. She positioned them around her apartment in various locations until every conceivable angle was covered. Any activity could now be recorded and stored on a remote server at the push of a button, and she could view the inside of her house at all times. If someone broke in while she was out, Alice would be alerted and the footage sent to her APhID.

She would need to arrange for someone she trusted to access the footage if anything happened to her. She knew of only one person she could trust one hundred percent, and that was Lachlan.

Alice tried calling her brother, but received no answer. She expected this – Lachlan could be next to impossible to get in touch with when she needed him the most, and becoming a fugitive had only made him

more elusive. He may have owned multiple APhIDs and other communication devices, but he always disabled their power sources when they weren't in use to prevent anyone from tracking him. He did this with all connected appliances – TVs, air-con units, lights, intercoms, alarms – claiming that anything on a network could be hacked into and his security compromised.

The first time Lachlan told her about this, Alice thought he was being ridiculously paranoid. Now, she regarded this behavior as perfectly reasonable.

She left Lachlan a message and asked him to get in touch with her as soon as possible.

She sat back and took a moment to evaluate her surroundings. She felt much safer now. A few sensible purchases had transformed her place into a mini-fortress. It was her very own prison; one in which she was both warden and inmate.

But even then, she knew it wouldn't be enough.

Chapter 10

More than three years had passed since Alice last had any contact with Gidget, but it took less than five minutes of driving to find him again. He was peddling his wares at his regular hangout, loitering between a convenience store and a pawn shop.

She parked on the opposite side of the road and watched him go about his daily business. Every few minutes, a scrawny youth with bad skin and worse personal hygiene would approach, and the two of them would disappear into a nearby alley to conduct their transaction.

From all appearances, Gidget was doing pretty well for himself. He was decked out in expensive street clothes and thousand-dollar trainers. The gold chain around his neck bounced on his chest as he moved, and a diamond-encrusted Rolex hung from his wrist.

But by far the most conspicuous display of his newly-acquired wealth was the change in his physique. The last time Alice saw him, Gidget had the body of an eight year old girl, or an underfed whippet. Now, his biceps and pectoral muscles burst out from beneath his tight tank top – which he insisted on wearing, despite today's cool and overcast weather conditions. These were almost certainly robotic implants, surgically inserted beneath the skin, which gave him a tougher and more menacing appearance without having to spend endless hours in the gym.

Alice waited a few minutes until Gidget was alone, then flicked her headlights on and off.

This caught his attention. He crawled up off his stoop for a better look.

He hesitated for a moment. He didn't recognize the car, so he didn't know if he was being summoned by a potential customer or an undercover cop.

A moment later, he cautiously shuffled over towards the car.

The passenger side window rolled down. Gidget flashed a wide smile when he saw who was behind the wheel.

"Well, well," he drawled, exposing a mouthful of gold-plated teeth. "Look who it is."

"Hey, Gidget," Alice replied.

Gidget was a self-anointed nickname. His parents had originally blessed him with the name Ivan Zuckerman, but he regarded this as an inadequate handle for a street-savvy drug dealer. Back when he and

Alice enjoyed a regular buyer-seller relationship, she would often refer to him by his birth name whenever she wanted to get under his skin. But years had passed since they had seen one another, and she was here to ask a favor, so she decided to play nice.

“So what brings you back ‘round these parts?” he said, leaning up against the hood of her car.

Alice noticed that Gidget now stood about six inches taller than how she remembered him. He used to be about five foot four; something he was always self-conscious about. He had either experienced an unusual late-twenties growth spurt, or he had undergone significant shin and vertebrae extensions to go along with the muscular implants.

Alice unlocked the car’s doors. “Hop in and I’ll tell you.”

Gidget grinned, then climbed into the front seat.

They drove a couple of streets over until they came across a semi-secluded car park. Alice switched off the engine. She did a quick check to make sure they were alone.

“Got any lemon drops on you?” she said.

This was a rhetorical question. She knew Gidget was selling lemon drops. That was all he did. Gidget was the guy you went to when you needed lemon drops. He used to sell a little bit of everything – heroin, coke, weed, meth, LSD, Rohypnol – but switched exclusively to lemon drops due to the increased demand and higher profit margins.

“How many you need?” he said.

“Ten. For now.”

Gidget nodded. “Cool.”

His hand disappeared down the front of his pants as he retrieved his stash. Alice tried not to let her revulsion show while he counted out the pills.

He slipped them into a Ziploc bag, then held them out for Alice’s approval. Ten small yellow chemical balls, the color of old newspaper.

Lemon drops: the low-grade Xylox substitute, manufactured in clandestine laboratories and sold on the streets. The name derived from their resemblance to tiny lemons (dimpled appearance, irregular shape), as well as the sour taste they left after swallowing.

Goliath, the elusive underworld figure, was said to control the majority of the lemon drop market. This was believed to be his primary source of income.

Alice felt a churning feeling rising from the pit of her stomach akin to seasickness. She knew she was dicing

with death simply by coming back to this part of town. Now, she had taken it a step further by actually purchasing the very thing that had once brought so much misery to her life.

“Hundred bucks,” Gidget said.

“A *hundred*?” Alice let out a burst of shocked laughter. She didn’t know what kind of scam Gidget was trying to pull here. “The last time I bought these, they were three dollars each!”

“What can I say? These are turbulent economic times we’re experiencing. Inflation’s affecting us all.”

“You have ten thousand dollars’ worth of gold glued to your teeth, Gidget. You’re not exactly doing it tough.”

“That’s my price,” he said with a blasé shrug. “Take it or leave it.”

“In that case, I’ll leave it.” Alice waved the pills away with a cavalier gesture. “I could buy the real thing for that much.”

“So why don’t you?”

Gidget taunted her with another golden smile.

Alice knew what he was trying to do, and Gidget knew that she knew. This was a total power play. He was ripping her off simply because he could. He knew she didn’t have anyone else she could turn to. He was also punishing her for staying away for so long.

Besides, ten pills meant nothing to Gidget. Business was booming. He shifted five times that volume every hour. Lemon drops were the growth industry of the moment, with a consumer demographic that was expanding by the day. There was little doubt it was a seller’s market.

Alice scowled for a moment, as if she still hadn’t decided on her next course of action.

She then relented and fished five twenties from her pocket. She reluctantly handed the money over.

In exchange, she was given ten poor-quality counterfeit Xylox pills that were recently in close proximity to a drug dealer’s genitals.

Gidget stuffed the cash into his pocket. “As always, it’s a pleasure doing business,” he said. He shoved the remaining pills back down the front of his pants. “I’d love to stick around and chat about old times, but I really do have to keep moving. Let’s not leave it so long between visits next time.”

He reached for the door handle.

“Gidget, wait!”

Alice’s words came out a little more desperate than she had intended.

“There is one other thing.”

Gidget looked at her. "What is it?"

"I need your help with something."

Alice took a moment to work up the courage to say what was on her mind. She had been incapacitated by an unexpected attack of nerves. Her mouth had dried up. Her tongue felt like it had tripled in size.

"Are you gonna tell me what it is, or do I have to guess?" Gidget said.

Alice swallowed her anxiety, then blurted it out.

"I need to buy a gun."

This statement was followed by a deathly silence.

Gidget tried not to react, but Alice caught an involuntary flicker in his eyes. She watched him carefully process her request, planning his next move with the greatest of caution.

An excruciating interval of time elapsed before Gidget finally spoke.

"Meet me behind the Black Star," he said. "Ten minutes."

He climbed out of the car before Alice could say any more.

Nine and a half minutes later, she found herself in the dank alley behind the Black Star Tavern.

Despite almost succumbing to a panic attack back in the car, she felt pretty good about how everything had gone so far. Finding a gun turned out to be surprisingly easy. In the end, all she had to do was ask. She expected Gidget to at least grill her for a few minutes and ask some questions.

She wasn't carrying much cash on her at that moment, but she could have the full amount by the end of the week.

A light breeze blew, and Alice unintentionally inhaled the myriad of scents festering throughout the area. She quickly moved to cover her nose. She'd forgotten how bad this part of the city could smell. She was able to tolerate it back when her senses were eroded by excessive Xylox use, but now it was like standing in an open-air ashtray. She could almost feel the germs on her skin multiplying at an exponential rate.

Without warning, she was grabbed from behind and shoved hard against the wall. Her body seized up with fear.

Her first instinct was that she was being attacked and robbed by some deranged xombie. But then she heard Gidget's voice.

"You really think I'm that stupid, huh?" he whispered into her ear.

His right hand clamped around the back of Alice's neck, pinning her to the wall. His left hand patted her down, frisking for hidden weapons or recording devices.

Alice winced as the left side of her face pressed against the cold bricks. She was left in no doubt that those were robotic implants inserted into Gidget's arms and chest. His strength bordered on superhuman.

"Gidget, relax," Alice said, though she was far from relaxed at that point in time. "I don't have anything on me."

"We'll see about that, won't we?"

"I wouldn't do that to you. You know me."

Gidget took his time with the search. He made sure it was thorough. When he was done he was confident that Alice was clean, with the added bonus of getting to know her a bit more intimately.

"Come on, Gidget. This is stupid."

He spun her around and pushed his face to within an inch of hers.

"You don't think this looks at all suspicious? You avoid this place like a venereal disease for two years, then turn up out of the blue asking me to get you *a gun*?"

"I'm desperate." Alice's voice faltered. "I ... I'm in trouble."

"So why did you come to me?"

"I didn't know where else I could go! You're the only one I know who could help me."

"I could go to prison just for giving you information like that!"

"I'm sorry! Just forget I said anything."

Gidget relaxed his grip slightly, and Alice managed to shrug free. She made a dash for the safety of the main road.

"That's right, leave!" Gidget shouted as she vanished around the corner. "You better not show your face 'round here again!"

Chapter 11

Thirty-two years ago the Pro-Firearms Industry Group (P-FIG), the secretive but powerful worldwide weapons organization, held its inaugural conference inside a plush hotel on the shores of Lake Geneva, Switzerland. It was billed as the most significant gathering of its type in history. Representatives from every major player in the global arms industry were in attendance, along with lobbyists, libertarians, right-wing media titans, and some of the world's most influential pro-gun politicians.

Their goal was simple: to tear down as many barriers as possible in allowing access to firearms, and to give every human being on the planet the opportunity to own a gun.

P-FIG president Ralph Lott delivered a stirring opening address, outlining his dreams of mass gun saturation one day culminating in world peace. Since it was a proven fact that increased gun ownership actually lowered crime rates, he reasoned, if everyone had access to guns then eliminating crime entirely would be an achievable goal.

He implored his comrades to do all they could to get as many guns into as many civilian hands as possible.

Midway through the speech, a booming shot rang out. The conference attendees, believing they were under attack from a gun- and freedom-hating liberal, scrambled to take cover.

One brave politician, Senator Sebastian Devereaux, spied the lone gunman standing near the front of the auditorium. He took out his concealed Sig Sauer P229 9mm handgun and, with little regard for his own safety, pounced up and opened fire. The gunman was struck four times in the chest and killed instantly.

Sadly, nine bystanders were also struck by stray bullets, five of whom later died from their injuries.

Thomas J. Hickman, a bestselling conservative author and top-rating talkback radio host, witnessed this while cowering beneath his seat. Under the impression that Senator Devereaux was the original gunman, he reached for the .44 caliber Magnum revolver he carried with him at all times, then charged forward and fired at the senator from point blank range.

Senator Devereaux was fatally wounded, as were three other attendees caught in the crossfire.

Mr. Hickman was then shot and killed by Omega Firearms CEO Vaughn Maloney, who mistook him for the first shooter.

What followed was twenty-three minutes of terror and confusion, exacerbated by low lighting and reduced

visibility, as the armed attendees tried to figure out exactly who the rampaging shooter was.

The gunfire eventually ceased and the smoke finally cleared. The bodies were counted, and seventy-eight of the two hundred and thirteen people in attendance had been killed. A further ninety-three were seriously injured.

P-FIG, the highly influential worldwide gun lobby, had been decimated by a self-inflicted mass shooting.

The gun control movement wasted no time in taking advantage of the situation. In the weeks and months following the tragedy, it was all too easy for them to swoop in and introduce new legislation banning firearms outright. The bills were passed with little opposition; the majority of the leading pro-gun advocates were either dead, incapacitated, or still had bullets lodged somewhere inside their bodies and were no longer willing to support the existing laws. Guns were quickly outlawed and removed en masse from the general population.

Only the police and armed forces were permitted to carry deadly weapons, in the form of the OBL-IV, and these were tightly controlled and regulated.

An investigation into the incident later concluded that the initial “gunshot” may have in fact been a car backfiring outside the venue.

Security footage from the event confirmed that the original “gunman”, the first person shot and killed by Senator Devereaux, was actually a member of the press brandishing a vaguely gun-shaped recording device.

The note was waiting for Alice when she finished work. It was flapping in the wind, wedged beneath her car’s left windscreen wiper.

She didn’t notice it until after she had climbed behind the wheel and fastened her seat belt. At first, she thought it was a parking ticket. Closer inspection revealed it to be a wrinkled piece of yellow paper folded in half.

She wound down the front window and reached out to retrieve the note.

Today had already been a strange sort of day. Alice had received another tip-off from Needlemouse – this one concerning a champion swimmer, a three-time Olympic gold medalist, caught in possession of two hundred counterfeit Xylox pills. While Xylox itself was not a performance-enhancing drug, it had been added to the banned list as it could be used to evade detection for other prohibited substances.

Cheating rumors had dogged the swimmer in question for some time, but she had never failed a drug test and always vehemently denied any wrongdoing. Alice now held the first solid evidence that her achievements

may not have been one hundred percent legitimate.

The article was scheduled for publication tomorrow, and it would almost certainly be the biggest sports-related scandal of the year.

And now, someone was leaving notes on the windscreen of her car. She wondered if maybe she had caught the attention of a secret admirer – or perhaps even a stalker – before quickly deducing that she wasn't quite enchanting enough to attract either.

She unfolded the note. The writing was scrawled in green pen.

This brought to mind an interesting but useless snippet of information a colleague once told her: that green ink was the color most frequently used in death threats.

But there was nothing threatening about this note. It was succinct and to the point. It didn't say who it was from, but she recognized Gidget's handwriting. Back when she used to buy lemon drops from him, he would often slip her notes telling her where and when they could to meet up to conduct their business.

This note simply contained a name and an address: "Joel Ozterhauzen. 11 Carling Crescent."

Chapter 12

Alice sat on Joel Ozterhauzen's tattered orange couch, observing as he displayed his remarkable talent for constructing working firearms using common household items.

She marveled as he disassembled a lawnmower motor and used the inner parts to create the hammer and firing pin. How he fashioned the barrel from a piece of steel piping salvaged from discarded machinery components he'd found in a scrapyard. How he used a bedspring to cock the hammer back, and then superglued on part of a broken ax for the handle.

The level of ingenuity and resourcefulness on display here was truly impressive. Alice might even admire Joel if he wasn't a convicted sex offender.

Joel Ozterhauzen's flimsy weatherboard bungalow was located in Carling Crescent, a notorious cul de sac known locally as the Village of the Damned.

Two decades earlier, several hundred houses in the area were demolished to make way for the construction of a new motorway. A few stubborn elderly residents in Carling Crescent dug in their heels and refused to budge after deciding they were perfectly happy where they were. All were within their rights to stay put, and were under no obligation to sell up, but their protest ultimately did nothing to halt construction. Their houses were not in the direct path of the motorway, which was being built above the existing residences, so the work continued unabated. A handful of the crumbling abodes remained standing.

Now, the street was blanketed with round-the-clock air and noise pollution, rendering the houses uninhabitable for families with children to reside in. As a result, the Department of Correctional Services declared this area the perfect dumping ground for the kinds of people whose conditions of parole explicitly forbade them from coming into contact with children.

Alice felt her skin crawling the second she set foot on Carling Crescent, and this wasn't only due to the amount of trash covering the street and sidewalk (passing motorists, aware of the kinds of people who lived there, regularly tossed their garbage out the window as they drove by).

The fact that she had turned up to this place alone, after dark, gave some indication of just how desperate she had become.

Her feelings of general ickiness had only intensified as she waited for Joel to assemble the weapon. On the

surface, his place appeared to be perfectly clean and well maintained. But she had never felt a greater urge to take a shower in her life.

The bungalow looked as if it had been decorated by a ninety year old widow. The rhythmic ticking of a grandfather clock set her on edge for reasons she couldn't fully articulate. The curious odor of wet dog lingered in the air. The fact that Joel didn't appear to own any pets only amplified the unsettling atmosphere.

"You know," Joel said. "I'm old enough to remember back to when these things were actually legal. There was a time when pretty much anyone who wanted a gun was allowed to have one. You could carry it around with you and everything."

Alice knew this to be true, but it was a concept she still struggled to wrap her head around. Firearms had been illegal for longer than she had been alive. The idea that regular civilians were permitted to walk into a store and purchase an instrument that could kill was horrendous to her. She could only imagine what the world must have been like back then. The murder rate was seven times higher than what it was now; the suicide rate four times higher. It seemed like another universe entirely.

"Now look," Joel said, affixing the barrel with a soldering iron. "This thing'll give you a reasonable amount of bang for your buck. You shoot at someone with this, I can't guarantee you'll kill 'em. But I can guarantee you'll hurt 'em."

He peered down at Alice over the top of his wire-framed glasses. They were an ugly pair with large thick lenses, resting atop a bulbous red nose, bushy moustache and nicotine-stained teeth. If Joel's home address didn't announce that he was a registered pervert, his outward appearance certainly confirmed it.

"It won't take their head off, like if they were shot with an OBL-IV," he added. "But hit 'em in the face or the neck, they won't be causing you trouble no more."

He finished off his work with a few strips of electrical tape that held everything in place. He then handed the weapon over to Alice.

It was heavier than she expected, and quite large and cumbersome. She only planned on keeping the gun at her house – it would be beyond stupid and reckless to carry something like this around in public – but the size of the weapon made sure of it, as it was far too bulky to conceal.

She felt a sudden surge of power rising inside of her, as she realized that the piece of metal in her hands had the capacity to end the life of whomever she chose, should the need arise.

She moved it between her left and right hands to get a feel for it.

She couldn't imagine ever pointing it at another human being and pulling the trigger. But then again, she

couldn't have imagined she'd ever be sitting on a sex offender's couch, handing over all the money she had in exchange for an illegal weapon, and yet here she was.

Joel retrieved an old coffee canister from beneath his chair. Inside were dozens of homemade bullets; rusted old bolts with one end shaved down to a point, and a cluster of crumbled match heads at the other end for propellant. He tossed a few handfuls into a paper bag and handed them to Alice.

"Careful with those," he said. "Keep them away from fire, or anything too hot."

Alice reached into her jacket and pulled out an envelope stuffed with fifteen thousand dollars cash.

She thought she might have had trouble parting with so much money – almost every dollar she had to her name was concealed within that envelope – but she handed it over without a moment's hesitation. She had scraped the money together by emptying her bank account and selling her car. But if her life was saved as a result, it would be worth it in the end.

Joel glanced inside the envelope and tallied up the bills. "Remember," he said. "If you get caught with that, you're on your own. You and me never met."

Alice nodded. She knew that once she left here, she would be sharing this encounter with as few people as possible.

She unzipped her backpack and stashed the gun and ammunition inside.

Joel rose from his seat. He stood in the doorway, blocking the room's only exit. "I wanna make sure we're both clear on that."

He glared at Alice in a way that chilled her blood.

"I get it," Alice said. "Anything happens, I don't know you."

Joel had good reason to show concern. Being caught in possession of a firearm would end in a mandatory ten-year prison sentence. But being found guilty of constructing them would almost certainly result in life behind bars.

Even publishing information on how to assemble a weapon could result in imprisonment, hence the tattered old blueprints that Joel had laid out before him – plans that had been copied by hand and passed around like contraband.

Alice didn't bother engaging in any further small talk or pleasantries once the transaction was completed. As soon as Joel moved out of the way, she made a quick dash for the door and hurried out of the bungalow.

She shivered as she stepped out onto the street. The air had cooled in the hour or so since she was last outside. But it wasn't just the temperature that gave her goosebumps.

Alice felt the eyes of a dozen deviants following her as she left Carling Crescent. She may have had a lethal weapon in her possession, but it did nothing to make her feel any safer.

Alice locked the gun away in the hope that she would never need to use it.

But three days later, at 12:15 a.m., she awoke with a start when she heard her front door click open.

She sat upright in her bed. Did she really hear that? Or did she just imagine it?

She halted her breathing and listened closely for movement. The only sound she heard was the incessant thump of her own heartbeat.

Her thoughts went to the baseball bat she had recently purchased, until she remembered it was leaning against the wall next to her front door, and therefore completely useless to her.

A minute passed, and she allowed herself to relax. She assumed the noise was a mere figment of an overactive and overstressed imagination, or the strange churning noises the building's plumbing seemed to make only at night. Or maybe it was her neighbor across the hall, stumbling home after a few too many mimosas and rattling on the wrong door handle. Chances were there was a logical explanation.

She closed her eyes and prepared to resume her nightly arm wrestle with insomnia.

Click. The light outside her room flicked on.

A thin strip of light appeared at the bottom of Alice's bedroom door, spilling in through the quarter-inch gap where the door met the floor.

There was no doubt about it. This wasn't her imagination. Someone had broken into her apartment.

A colt bolt of fear ricocheted through her body.

Her hand dropped down to her side. She felt around for the wooden box beneath her bed and flicked the latch open. Her fingers moved across the coarse steel of the gun's barrel.

Her hands trembled like a paint shaker as she removed the gun from the box.

She slipped out of bed as quietly as she could manage and crouched down on the floor. Her hand reached back into the box to retrieve three bullets.

She pressed each of the bullets into the chamber.

She hoped she was doing everything right. She had practiced loading and unloading the gun a few times shortly after she brought it home, just to make sure she could do it if the need arose. But that was in the middle of the day. Now it was pitch black, with only her digital clock providing any sort of illumination, and a pair of

hands vibrating like an alcoholic's on the first day of detox.

A floorboard creaked outside her room. A series of slow footsteps crept closer and closer.

Alice edged over towards the corner of the room. The intruder, whoever it was, would probably go straight for her bed when they attacked her. She was at least buoyed by the knowledge that she had two advantages over her assailant; the element of surprise, and a lethal weapon.

The shadow of two feet appeared at the bottom of her bedroom door.

Alice lifted the gun and aimed.

She had never fired a gun before, of course. No one her age had. Most people her age hadn't even seen a gun in real life. That was something that belonged solely to their parents' and grandparents' generations, like newspapers and stores that sold music. Her knowledge of guns came mostly from movies and television. It looked pretty simple there, and she hoped that it was. Just point it at the thing you wanted dead and pull the trigger. She prayed there was nothing more to it.

She prayed that it worked, too. Improvised firearms, like the one she clutched in her palpitating hands, were notoriously volatile. They didn't always work the way they were supposed to. But Alice felt much safer with the weapon than she would have felt without it. Even if she didn't shoot the intruder, just firing the weapon, and the noise it would produce, should be enough to scare them off.

The door handle turned.

Alice's body tensed up. Her stomach contorted into a series of complex knots.

The door drifted open.

"Alice ..." a voice whispered.

The intruder appeared in silhouette. A man. Quite tall, about six foot two, holding something in his right hand. A weapon.

His left hand reached across for the light switch.

Alice's index finger tightened around the trigger.

She squeezed her eyes closed, just as the lights flickered on.

"Whoa! Jesus, Alice!"

Lachlan jumped out of his skin when he saw Alice, crouched on the floor in the corner of the room, pointing a gun at his head.

"What the hell is that thing?!"

"Lachlan!" Alice screamed. "What are you doing here?!"

A rush of nausea hit Alice when she realized she was milliseconds away from shooting her own brother, and that the “weapon” in his hand was a half-empty soda bottle.

“What do you *think* I’m doing here? You called me and asked me to come over!”

“So you decided break in?”

“I didn’t break in! You gave me a key, remember?”

“Ever heard of *knocking*?”

Alice struggled for breath. Her pulse raced at double-speed, her adrenaline levels off the charts.

“I knocked three times! When you didn’t answer I was worried something might have happened. You sounded pretty stressed in that message you left me, so I came as soon as I could.”

“Oh.”

Alice looked away. She was left feeling more than a little bit foolish right now.

“Now,” Lachlan said, slowly regaining composure as the shock of the moment faded from view. “Would you care to tell me what exactly is going on here?”

Chapter 13

A few facts about the Consortium:

This mysterious conglomerate of mega-wealthy sociopaths was founded in 2052 by seven multi-billionaires.

They began admitting one new member to their exclusive club every two years. Prospective members needed to satisfy two criteria in order to gain admittance: they had to be nominated by an existing Consortium member, and they had to have a net worth greater than \$100 billion.

The Consortium currently had thirteen members among its ranks, all of whom occupied positions on the list of the fifty richest people on the planet.

Their combined net worth was over nine trillion dollars.

The seven founders were originally associates in the corporate and political worlds, and came together due to a shared love of exotic gambling.

The Consortium bankrolled a number of unconventional gambling contests every year.

Their most prestigious game was held once every four years.

This involves inviting a group of strangers to participate in a tontine, where the final living contestant stands to win a considerable sum of money.

Each member of the Consortium selects the civilian they believe will be the last one standing. If more than one member has selected the winner, the prize is shared. If no one has selected the winner, the prize jackpots.

The first lottery was held in 2054. The majority of the participants were violent criminals. The organizers believed these types of people were more likely to kill for financial gain, and their inclusion would ultimately make for a more compelling spectacle.

They soon discovered that a lust for money was a phenomenon that transcended the sociological divide, as well as age, race, religion, gender and ethnicity. When many millions of dollars were at stake, regular law-abiding citizens proved to be every bit as ruthless and bloodthirsty as the murderers and rapists.

The unpredictable nature of the lottery was the main reason why the members of the Consortium preferred it to regular gambling. Roulette and blackjack have a finite number of outcomes. The lotteries have an infinite number.

No one can ever predict what a contestant will do, or how they will react. There was almost no way of guessing the winner based solely on their appearance.

Alice clutched at her temples. Her vision skewed. She tried to stop the room from spinning. This was too much information – too much *bizarre* information – entering her brain all at once, and her head was starting to reject it.

She had spilled everything to Lachlan, telling him the whole story from beginning to end – the invitation, the meeting, the lottery, and the recent deaths.

Moments after Alice opened her mouth, Lachlan knew exactly what she had gotten herself mixed up in. He had heard all the stories about the Consortium, this thirteen-headed hydra and the twisted games they played, but he was never really sure how much of it was true and how much was inflated embellishment. But everything Alice had just described confirmed his worst fears.

“What a total waste of money,” Alice said, once Lachlan had filled her in on everything he knew about the Consortium. “Throwing away a hundred million dollars on a stupid contest.”

“A hundred million means nothing to them,” Lachlan said. “They’d lose that much in an average poker game.”

“I still don’t get it. Why bother going to all that trouble? If they love gambling so much, why not just hit the big casinos of the world?”

“Because casinos are for regular people. Mere mortals, like you and me. The Consortium regard themselves as advanced beings.”

“And the normal rules of society don’t apply to them?”

“More or less. When you reach that level of wealth and power, there isn’t much you can’t get away with. You live in a world free from consequences.”

Alice shook her head. “This is so messed up. I still can’t believe anyone would do this.”

“You have to understand the mindset of these people. They’ve already cleaned out the world’s biggest casinos. They’ve won and lost tens of millions on a single horse race. Conventional gambling doesn’t excite them anymore. They’re like junkies or thrill-seekers. They want something more extreme, something where the stakes are as high as they can possibly go.”

“So the only way they can get off now is by watching strangers kill one other, like schoolboys watching

seagulls fighting over a discarded sandwich?”

“Hey, you don’t become obscenely wealthy by being a decent and thoughtful person. That kind of fortune is accessible only by losing all touch with humanity. These people are so far removed from the rest of us that they no longer view us as human. We’re like a different species to them.”

This was almost too much for Alice to comprehend. The news just kept getting worse and worse. It was bad enough that she found herself trapped in an impossible situation, with her life rapidly spiraling out of control. But the fact that it had all been orchestrated for the amusement of a bunch of bored rich creeps playing their status games made her seethe with immeasurable rage.

“So now you have some idea of what you’re up against,” Lachlan said.

“Maybe I was better off not knowing,” Alice said. “You know, ignorance is bliss.”

“That may be true, but ignorance won’t do anything to increase your odds of survival. And for the record ...”

Lachlan used a pencil to lift up the gun that Alice had come perilously close to shooting him with. He took great care to avoid getting his prints on it.

“This won’t either.”

“Can I ask you something, Alice?”

Alice’s eyes reluctantly blinked open. She was in the half-awake half-asleep zone, her head resting against the car window as they rattled towards their destination. It was just before five a.m.

“Don’t ask if you can ask me a question, Lachlan,” she murmured. “Just ask it.”

“Okay. What would you have done if I really was an intruder?”

“I would have shot you.”

“I figured that. But I mean afterwards. You’d have a dead body with a bullet inside it sitting in your apartment. How would you explain that to the police?”

“Don’t worry, I’d already thought of that.”

Lachlan waited for her to elaborate. “Well?”

Alice stifled a yawn. “I would have told them the gun was yours. I’d say that you broke in, there was a struggle, and the gun discharged.”

Lachlan didn’t say anything, but he had to admit he was impressed. That was actually a pretty convincing

cover story.

Alice closed her eyes and pulled her blanket up over her body.

The two of them were on the lookout for a suitable place to test out Alice's new weapon. Lachlan had tried to convince Alice to get rid of the illegal firearm, explaining that the risks of keeping the gun far outweighed any theoretical safety benefits, but his advice fell on deaf ears. Alice knew she would need something to protect her. Maybe not right away. But they'd be coming for her sooner or later, and she wanted to be prepared.

Besides, the gun had cost fifteen grand. She wasn't about to just throw it away.

Lachlan then insisted that if she was going to keep it, she should at least make sure she knew how to use it, and that it worked properly.

"You do understand how dangerous those things are, don't you?" he said after a few minutes of tense silence. "People have had their fingers blown off by improvised firearms."

Alice responded without opening her eyes.

"Yes, Lachlan."

"The people making them don't really know what they're doing. They just cobble together a bunch of parts using some old blueprints."

"I know that, Lachlan."

Another tense silence. Lachlan gripped the steering wheel and stared into the infinite stretch of road before him.

"You know how much trouble you could get in? You don't even have to have the gun in your possession for them to throw you in prison. Just fingerprints or DNA is enough for a conviction."

"I *know* that, Lachlan!" Alice snapped, a little louder than she had intended. "Look, I appreciate your concern, but you don't have to keep explaining everything to me. I'm well aware of the risks, and I know how unbelievably stupid my behavior is."

"I'm only trying to help," Lachlan said quietly.

"Well, given that you're currently wanted for kidnapping, I don't think you're in any position to lecture me on my poor life choices."

Alice flicked the radio on, then turned her body away and closed her eyes. She made another futile attempt at snatching a few more minutes' sleep.

Neither one spoke for the remainder of the journey.

Theirs was the only vehicle on the road at this early hour of the morning. Vast fields of nothingness swept by on either side. The thin light of dawn peeked over the horizon.

Half an hour later, they arrived at a secluded spot near an abandoned quarry.

They now found themselves well and truly in the middle of nowhere. Alice thought Lachlan was being ridiculously cautious by driving almost three hours away from the city to test out the gun, but Lachlan insisted on putting as many miles between themselves and civilization as possible. They had to make sure they were out of range of any surveillance crafts; not to mention nosy farmers who might call the police after hearing gunshots in the distance.

Lachlan assembled a makeshift stand by wedging a plank of wood in between two large rocks. He taped the handle of the gun to the wood, then carefully tied a length of fishing wire around the trigger.

“Stand back,” he said, unspooling the fishing wire towards his car. “We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Alice couldn’t help but groan. Lachlan was being dramatic, making a bigger deal out of this than it needed to be. She knew he was well-intentioned, and that he was only doing what he believed a protective “older” brother was supposed to do. But from time to time, this could come across as patronizing.

She took a few backward steps and leaned against the hood of the car.

“Further,” Lachlan said. “Go around the other side.”

“I’m already standing fifty feet away.”

“Just get behind the car. In case something goes wrong.”

Alice let out a small huff, then moved around to the other side.

“Is this necessary?” she said. “I mean really, what do you expect will happen?”

“I don’t know what to expect, Alice. The whole thing could explode and send pieces of shrapnel flying. Anything could happen, which is why we have to take precautions.”

Lachlan ran the fishing wire underneath the car. He came around and crouched down beside Alice.

“Ready?” Lachlan asked.

“Let’s do this,” Alice replied with minimal enthusiasm.

Lachlan wrapped the fishing wire around his fingers, then pulled hard. Nothing happened.

He tried a second time. Still nothing.

He peered up above the car. The gun was exactly as he’d left it – taped to the plank of wood, pointing in the opposite direction.

He ducked back down and tugged at the wire once more. Nothing.

“Dammit,” he said under his breath.

“What is it?” Alice asked.

“I’m not sure. The trigger might be jammed.”

A small part of Alice died upon hearing this. Fifteen thousand dollars spent on a gun that didn’t shoot.

Lachlan gave the wire one final hard yank. This time, the gun discharged.

A booming thunderclap exploded, rebounding around the hills and plains for miles and miles.

A millisecond later, the car’s two front windows exploded.

A shower of glass rained down on Alice. She threw her arms up over her head in an attempt to shield herself from the deluge.

The echo of the gunshot faded, and an eerie silence took its place. A brief passage of time passed.

The two siblings remained there a moment longer, both crouched in a tight ball.

Lachlan was the first to raise his head. He looked up, then crawled across to Alice. She had weathered the brunt of the onslaught.

“Are you alright?” he said.

“I think so,” she replied.

Alice carefully picked the fragments of glass from her hair. She ran her hand across her face and neck to check she hadn’t suffered any cuts.

“Okay, what just happened?” she said.

The two of them climbed to their feet and cautiously approached the gun. It was still intact. A thin ribbon of smoke trailed out from the end of the barrel.

Lachlan knelt down for a closer inspection. “There seems to be an obstruction in the chamber,” he said, peering inside.

He looked at where the gun was positioned, then to the two shattered windows directly behind.

“Oh, Jesus. I don’t believe it.”

“What is it?”

“The bullet flew out of the gun in the opposite direction.” A burst of unintentional laughter escaped from Lachlan’s mouth. He shook his head in wonder. “This thing shoots backwards.”

Alice was hit by a wash of cold air when she realized she had relinquished her savings in exchange for a gun that didn’t work properly.

On a more positive note, any concerns she may have held about the gun's lack of firepower were put to rest. The car's windows had been completely obliterated.

Lachlan tried not to smirk as he unwound the tape from around the gun's handle. But he couldn't help himself.

"Looks like you've dodged a bullet there, Alice," he said.

The drive back home was uncomfortable, and not just because they were traveling inside a rental car missing its two front windows. Or that they were irritated by the tiny granules of glass on the seats that they weren't able to remove completely.

Alice was still fuming over the fact that she had emptied her bank account and risked prison for a gun that was more likely to kill her than the intended target.

She had no idea what she was going to do with the useless firearm currently sitting between her feet. She wanted to get rid of it immediately by tossing it into the quarry, or in a body of water somewhere, but Lachlan reminded her that it could still be traced back to her through forensic analysis. She could remove her fingerprints from the weapon, but not her DNA.

She could try taking it back to the place she bought it from. But she doubted Joel Ozterhauezen offered any sort of refund policy for his products. Besides, Carling Crescent was the last place on earth she wanted to revisit.

She could attempt to recoup some of the money by selling it on the streets herself. But this would involve risking a lengthy prison sentence if she was caught – not to mention the potential retribution she'd face when the buyer discovered they'd been sold a dud.

She was left with little choice but to hold onto it for the time being. She'd have to stash it away somewhere, chalk this whole episode up to a *very* expensive life lesson, and hope like hell it never gets discovered. Then, when the time was right, she would find a way to destroy or dispose of it permanently. Maybe she could try dismantling it piece by piece, or melt it down with a blowtorch.

Until then, it would simply become another problem that Alice would have to learn to live with.

They arrived back in the city, just as the morning traffic was beginning to swell.

A police car drove by with its sirens blaring, and Lachlan was struck by a crippling attack of nerves. All he could think about was what would happen if he was pulled over. A wanted kidnapper, behind the wheel of a

rental car with its two front windows shot out, and an illegal firearm in the front seat. He may as well have the words "ARREST ME" spray-painted across the hood.

All Alice could think about was that she was exhausted before the day had even begun, and she still had a full day of work to look forward to.

Chapter 14

Lachlan didn't stick around for too much longer after dropping Alice back at her place. He was visibly on edge the whole trip back, terrified of the potential ramifications of being stopped by the police.

Alice knew he felt bad about leaving her in the lurch like this. But she also knew he wasn't left with much of a choice. He was being pursued by a number of seriously aggrieved law enforcement agencies. Staying in one place for any length of time was far too risky. Besides, there was nothing he could do that would help Alice with the lottery. There was nothing anyone could do.

They said their goodbyes, and then he was gone.

A few minutes after Lachlan left, it dawned on Alice that today could have been the last time they would ever see each other. Neither one appeared to have anything resembling a bright future. Her participation in the lottery meant that she could be taken out at any moment. He could be arrested and tossed in a cell at any moment, never to be seen or heard of again.

Alice went to work and sleepwalked her way through another day. Long periods were spent in a trance-like state, staring into the abyss of her screen and zoning out for minutes at a time.

Dinah passed her cubicle on several occasions, but she mistook Alice's stupor for intense concentration and left her alone.

At around mid-afternoon, a time of day she struggled to stay awake even at the best of times, a sudden revelation descended on her from out of nowhere. It was as if the pieces from a jigsaw puzzle had been fed into her subconscious and rearranged to form a clear image.

She didn't know what made her think of it, but the article from a few weeks ago somehow floated back into her brain. The one about the lottery. The one that had been suppressed under mysterious circumstances. Dinah didn't tell her who had ordered the suppressing, only that it was someone "higher up".

Now it all made sense. The more thought she devoted to it, the more she came to recognize just how high up this directive had come.

It could only have come from one person. And that one person was Solomon Turner.

Alice's boss, the owner of *The Daily Ink*, and the world's tenth-richest man.

Solomon Turner had personally intervened and ordered her story be put to death.

And it didn't require any great mental leaps to figure out why he would want to kill off a potentially high-rating article like that.

It was because Solomon Turner was part of the Consortium. He was one of the thirteen betting on whether Alice would live or die.

Alice slipped out of work a few minutes later. She invented an excuse about leaving early to follow up on a hot story, but in the end she simply left without bothering to tell anyone.

She stepped outside, then put her head down and started walking. She didn't know where she was going. She only knew that she had to get away from the office. She needed to clear her head before it collapsed under the immense weight.

The realization that Solomon Turner was partly responsible for Alice's present situation buzzed around inside her brain like a bumblebee trapped in a jar.

How did she end up in this position?

Was this all a huge coincidence, or had she been specifically targeted to take part in the lottery?

Had she said or done something to attract her boss's attention?

These were all questions she knew she would probably never find answers to.

She paced for another two blocks before coming across a crowd of people. There was some sort of commotion going on.

She moved in closer, and saw that the road ahead was blocked off with a wall of flashing lights. Police, ambulance and media crews were all there, jostling for prime position.

Alice stood back and waited, unable to move any further. It didn't take long for the inevitable game of Chinese whispers to commence.

"Some poor man was hit by a truck while crossing the road," she heard one onlooker say.

"He wasn't crossing the road, he was pushed," whispered another.

"... it was the most horrible thing I have ever seen ..."

"... he was just standing there minding his own business when this guy came out of nowhere and shoved him under the wheels of the truck ..."

"... there was no confrontation, no altercation, nothing ..."

"... a completely random attack ..."

“... I’m not even sure they knew each other ...”

“... can you imagine what sort of person would do a thing like that to a complete stranger ...”

Alice could only stand by and watch as, little by little, the world around her collapsed into madness. She knew all too well what would motivate a person to do something like that.

Within the hour, the envelope announcing Jordan Bradley’s elimination would be slipped under Alice’s front door, and under the doors of the twenty-one other contestants still remaining in the lottery.

WELSH FACES DOPING BAN

The Daily Ink

30 September, 2066

Champion swimmer Cassandra Welsh may be stripped of her Olympic medals and her world records overturned after being caught in possession of more than two hundred counterfeit Xylox pills.

Welsh also faces a four-year suspension if found guilty of using the prohibited substance.

Although counterfeit Xylox is not considered performance enhancing, it has been outlawed by the International Association of Athletics Federations due to its potential to interfere with drug tests.

Welsh, 22, burst into the spotlight at the 2064 Cairo games where she took home a haul of three gold and two silver medals, as well as smashing the world records for the 100 meter butterfly and 200 meter breaststroke. She has since become one of the world's most recognizable and highest-paid athletes, earning more than \$400 million in prize money and endorsements in the past year.

The revelation that one of the sport's biggest names may be a drug cheat has sent shock waves through the swimming world, who have battled to clean up the sport's tarnished image following years of scandals.

Elixia Pharmaceuticals, the makers of Xylox and a major sponsor of Welsh's, moved to cut ties with the swimmer yesterday. They have expressed disappointment that she would consume a product that both acts as a masking agent and infringes on their intellectual property rights.

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Chapter 15

Tara Deangelis blew a ring of smoke into the air as she slumped her body against the wall of the local kebab shop. She glanced impatiently at her watch, then scanned her eyes through the crowd of human traffic. Still no sign of her boyfriend.

Her hands twitched as she sucked another long drag from her cigarette. Where *are* you, she muttered under her breath. Nearly twenty-four hours had passed since they last scored, and her jaundiced skin was teeming with an infestation of invisible bugs.

A minute later, a tingling sensation burned a hole in the lower part of her chest.

Tara winced at the unexpected discomfort. Her first instinct was to dismiss this as a bad case of indigestion. But she soon ruled that out when she remembered it had been several days since her last meal. Since becoming hooked on Xylox, food had fallen significantly lower on her list of priorities – along with just about everything else in her life.

She placed her hand to her abdomen, just south of her ribcage, where this abnormal feeling originated. She swallowed and hoped it would pass.

But it only grew worse. It felt like an alien was forming inside her.

Then came the noise.

BEEP ... BEEP ... BEEP ...

A feeling of utter dread enveloped Tara. As soon as she heard the beeping, she knew exactly what was happening.

The sour taste of fear filled Tara's mouth.

Moments later she collapsed to the ground, struck down by severe spasms of pain. She felt like she was being stabbed repeatedly in the chest with a hot butter knife. A scream of pure agony escaped from her mouth.

She was incapacitated, curled up in the fetal position. But she knew she had to move.

Time was her enemy.

Fighting against the excruciating pain, she crawled on her hands and knees to the nearest trash can and tipped it over. She rummaged through the contents until she found an empty beer bottle. She smashed it against the ground.

Her curious behavior soon attracted the attention of passing shoppers, drawn to the sight of this petite young woman, barely out of her teens, in the throes of what appeared to be a psychotic episode.

Throughout it all, the noise continued at a steady rate.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Tara lifted her shirt and braced for a spot of improvised surgery. She pressed the dagger of glass hard against her skin.

A concerned onlooker, a kindly-looking man in his fifties, felt compelled to intervene.

“Are you alright?” he asked tentatively.

“Go away,” she groaned, waving the man off. “Get out of here. Now.”

The man was unsure what he could do next. “Nobody’s going to hurt you.” He tried to come across as nonthreatening as possible.

“Leave me alone!”

The words left Tara’s mouth as a slur of moans.

“We only want to help. We can call someone if you need us to.”

He leaned down and placed a gentle hand on Tara’s shoulder. She lashed out and slapped it away.

“Stay away from me!” she screamed.

The man saw the broken bottle buried halfway into Tara’s torso. He saw the red light flashing beneath her skin, and the river of blood gushing from the wound.

“Call an ambulance!” the man shouted. “She’s trying to cut herself open!”

The crowd of onlookers let out a collective gasp at what they were witnessing. Horrified parents snatched up their children and removed them from the area as quickly as possible.

The beeping increased in both volume and frequency.

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

Tara bit down hard, then jammed her fingers into the incision in her chest. Her hands were already soaked red, the glass having sliced through a major artery. Blood trickled out of her like a cracked water pipe. A large puddle quickly formed around her.

Tara struggled through the pain and wooziness as her fingers explored the inside of her body.

But deep down, she knew she was fighting an unwinnable battle. Even if she knew what she was doing, there was no way she could extract the implant from her body in time.

She heard the sound, and her time had come to an end.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP

The implant, a small matchbox-sized lump of plastic and Semtex, flashed bright red, chirping out a high-pitched screech.

Tara filled her lungs with air to scream her final words. But those words would forever remain unspoken.

The explosive device detonated, and the crowd of stunned onlookers witnessed Tara's body being blown apart in a shower of human flesh.

Later that day, the thirteen members of the Consortium were informed that Tara Deangelis – aka contestant number four hundred and seventy-six – was the latest unlucky player in their Russian roulette competition.

This was one of the Consortium's minor contests, held every twenty-eight days. It involved a group of people volunteering to have small explosive devices surgically implanted inside their bodies. One of these devices was timed to go off at a random point sometime within the next four weeks. The individual members of the Consortium then placed bets on who they believed would be the next contestant to get blown to pieces.

Despite the contest's ghastly premise, there was never any shortage of willing participants. The contest currently boasted over nine hundred volunteers, each of whom were paid five thousand dollars per cycle. Most were desperate zombies who needed some fast money and never thought too far beyond their next hit. Others were just regular people who had fallen onto hard times.

As soon as someone was blown up and a winner declared, the next contest commenced and each player received a further five thousand dollars. For many, it was an ongoing source of income.

Since no one in the Consortium had selected four hundred and seventy-six for this round of the competition, the prize would jackpot.

The current prize pool stood at \$231 million.

Chapter 16

Alice,

I have some incredible info regarding Goliath. Can't say too much at this stage, but it's BIG.

Meet me out the front of the courthouse (near the steps) at 2:15 p.m. today.

Stand by for further details.

Needlemouse.

Alice checked her watch. It had just ticked over to 2:25 p.m., and her source had yet to show. She made eye contact with every person walking by in the hope that they were Needlemouse – Alice still had no idea what he or she looked like – but all she got in return were blank looks.

Nerves were creeping up on her. That sick feeling in her stomach had returned and was slowly working its way up towards her throat. The stress was causing her left eyelid to flicker like the wings of a hummingbird.

She wondered what this big news could be. Goliath's true identity? Alice didn't want to get too far ahead of herself, but there had to be an outside chance that it could happen. Needlemouse had supplied her with some brilliantly salacious (and lucrative) stories in the few weeks they had been communicating. These included the family-values senator with a predilection for underage hookers, and the police sergeant caught tipping off a known drug supplier about an upcoming raid. But to actually identify Goliath would be nothing less than the scoop of the century.

Of course, it wouldn't be the first time *The Daily Ink* had outed someone as Goliath. Speculating who Goliath might be was an ongoing obsession for the news service, with more than two dozen individuals accused over the past few years. Most were quick to issue firm denials to the contrary, although one in particular – Darcy Sixx, a flamboyant nightclub promoter with alleged links to organized crime – seemed to revel in the attention that came his way once he was labeled the city's most notorious psychopath. He played up to the rumor, hinting to his creditors and business rivals that it might be true, and what would happen to anyone foolish enough to get on his wrong side.

Unfortunately, the real Goliath didn't appreciate having his good name and reputation besmirched by this imposter, and Mr. Sixx soon dropped off the face of the earth.

Several weeks later, the tips of two fingers were discovered sticking out of a cement block that had recently been laid as the foundation for a new skyscraper. The builders cracked it open and recovered the body of Darcy Sixx. He had a deep sea diver's mask covering his face, and an oxygen tank strapped to his back.

An autopsy later revealed that he was still alive (albeit with internal bleeding and multiple broken bones) when he was tossed into the slab and the wet cement poured on top of him. It hardened before he was able to crawl out.

Darcy Sixx finally died, frozen inside a slab of cement, when the oxygen in his tank ran out approximately eight hours later.

From that moment on, anyone accused of being Goliath was quick to distance themselves from any such allegations.

All of this played out in the back of Alice's mind as she waited for Needlemouse to show. If she was to continue to write about Goliath, she would need to exercise great caution. Goliath usually left journalists alone if they stuck to writing the typical over-the-top sensationalized stuff that *The Daily Ink* excelled at. In fact he seemed to encourage this, as it did wonders to enhance his reputation. It was only when they ventured a little too close to the truth that the journalists had to watch their backs.

Alice's APhID then chimed with another message.

Mission aborted. I think I was followed. Too dangerous to continue.

Sorry, but I may have to lay low for a while.

Needlemouse.

Alice put her APhID away, and the dark clouds of disappointment quickly gathered above her. She had just watched what was potentially the biggest story of her lifetime slip away from her.

She let out a heavy sigh, then slowly trudged back towards the bus stop with her head down. That'll teach you to get your hopes up, she muttered under her breath.

She had been walking for less than a minute when a familiar face appeared in the near-distance.

Coming towards her, on the opposite side of the road, was a man she had seen at last month's meeting. He was one of the lottery contestants. The double amputee in the wheelchair.

His name was Christopher Gibson, and he wasn't hard to miss.

They both spotted each other at the same time. Alice came to a sudden halt. Christopher did likewise. Their eyes met from opposite sides of the street. Neither one was sure what to do next.

Without warning, Christopher spun his chair around and sped off in the other direction.

“Wait!” Alice called out after him. “Christopher!”

But he had already vanished around the corner.

Alice broke out in a run. She crossed over the busy road, sidestepping the oncoming traffic, then made it to the other side.

She raced down the street and around the corner.

Christopher was nowhere to be found. She stepped up on a bench to try for a better look. Still nothing. He had vanished into thin air.

The entrance to a shopping mall was up ahead. It was the only place Christopher could have disappeared into so quickly.

She hurried down to the automatic doors.

The center was a sprawling indoor metropolis, bustling with an ocean of people. Alice conducted a quick scan the place, then kept on moving.

She increased her pace to a brisk walk, careful not to draw attention to herself. Still no sign of Christopher.

He couldn't be that difficult to find. An overweight guy in a wheelchair was sure to stick out in a place like this.

A couple more minutes of fruitless searching went by, and she grudgingly accepted the fact that he was probably gone. Maybe he never came into the center in the first place, and she was wasting her time looking here. She decided she may as well give up now and go home.

She rounded a corner as she headed for the nearest exit, and found Christopher parked in front of an elevator.

An out of order sign was taped to the doors of the elevator. Christopher was trapped. Panic filled his eyes, like a cornered animal coming face-to-face with a hunter.

He inhaled desperate gulps of oxygen from the respiratory mask pressed to his face.

“Stay away from me!” he shouted, the mask muffling the fear in his words.

His eyes darted left and right, searching for any bystanders who might come to his aid. A few shoppers glanced in his direction, but none looked like they were about to get involved just yet.

Only now did it occur to Alice how this must have looked from Christopher's perspective. He was a

participant in a lottery that was proving to have an extraordinarily high mortality rate, and another participant had just pursued him through the streets. She couldn't really blame him for jumping to the wrong conclusion.

"I'm not going to do anything," Alice said. She spoke in a calm, measured voice to let him know she posed no threat to him. The last thing she wanted was to cause a scene.

"I mean it!" Christopher said.

He scrambled to pull a small rectangular object from his pocket. Alice thought it might have been some sort of weapon, but then recognized it as a distress horn. It was just like the one she owned.

"This thing shrieks at a hundred and twenty decibels!" he warned. "It'll destroy your eardrums. Take one more step and I'm switching it on!"

"I wasn't following you Christopher, and I'm not going to hurt you," Alice said. "I only want to talk."

They stood there for a while, facing one another in a Mexican stand-off. From Alice's point of view, Christopher resembled a scared, defenseless child.

Then his face softened. Alice could see that he had relaxed a little. She smiled at him, and he attempted to reciprocate the gesture.

"Listen, do you want to go somewhere to talk about this?" she said.

"I'm on edge all the time," Christopher said, the trauma still audible in his voice. "Every day, I'm looking over my shoulder and jumping at shadows. I've been getting these calls day and night. Someone keeps putting dead rats outside my house. Anytime I hear a strange noise, or if someone looks at me for too long in the street, I think this is it, my time is up. And then it doesn't happen."

Alice and Christopher had found a café where they could talk in private. This in itself was an ordeal; they had tried three other cafés before this one, and all three had inadequate wheelchair accessibility. The aspiring investigative journalist in Alice saw this injustice as the basis for a potential feature story, until she reminded herself that *The Daily Ink* was unlikely to care about any issue that didn't involve psychotic criminals or moderately famous people copulating with one another.

"The worst part is the waiting," he continued. He fidgeted with the skull ring around his little finger, the type sold in comic book stores for five dollars. "I know they're coming to get me. I don't know why they haven't done it already. I assume they're just toying with me, leaving me to suffer as I await my inevitable fate."

Christopher lifted his coffee to his lips. His trembling hands spilled most of it into the saucer.

“I mean, let’s face it,” he said with a sad smile. “I’m not exactly a hard target, am I?”

With his graying temples and permanent hangdog expression, Christopher looked every one of his forty-one years. But from certain angles Alice could see the frightened little boy inside, the one tormented every day of his life.

“You really think that will happen?” she said. “That the contestants will all start killing one another to get to the money?”

Christopher gave Alice a look that asked whether that was a serious question.

“Do you even doubt it? Five are people dead – so far. In less than a month. With one hundred million dollars up for grabs. I’m surprised the whole thing isn’t over already.”

There was a brief silence between them. Alice sipped her green tea.

It tasted a little funny. It was slightly bitter, like the cup had not been rinsed properly when it was washed. She emptied another sachet of sugar into her drink and stirred.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

Christopher nodded.

“That night of the meeting, when we were all offered the two thousand dollars or a place in the lottery—”

“You want to know why I didn’t just take the two thousand dollars?”

“Well, yeah.”

Christopher shrugged. “Two reasons, mostly. The first reason was the money. The second reason ... was the money.”

This managed to bring a smile to Alice’s face.

“What about you?” he said. “You seem pretty smart. Why didn’t you just take the two thousand dollars?”

“Well ...” Alice took a moment to think it over. “I didn’t actually decide for myself. I couldn’t make up my mind, so in the end I tossed a coin.”

She offered an embarrassed smile.

“Stupid, I know.”

Christopher lifted his eyebrows. “Is that what you’re telling yourself?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Come on. You entered the lottery for the same reason me and twenty-five others did. The thought of a hundred million dollars in your bank account. You were hypnotized by all those zeroes. You wouldn’t have been able to live with yourself if you’d turned down an opportunity like that.”

“No, but ... I really did toss a coin to decide.”

“Sure, tossing a coin may have allowed you to *think* the decision was out of your hands. But if it had landed on heads instead of tails, you would’ve gone with the best out of three.”

Alice was taken aback by Christopher’s succinct – and somewhat accurate – analysis. She realized he was a lot brighter than she first gave him credit for.

He was right about being hypnotized by all those zeroes. Once she started thinking about the money, and the infinite possibilities that would follow, it was a difficult thought to dislodge from her mind. That was simply human nature. Everyone dreams of winning the golden ticket, and waking up one morning to discover that all your problems have disappeared overnight.

He was also right about the coin toss, but with one notable exception: she didn’t do the best out of three when it landed on heads.

She simply ignored the result and put her name down for the lottery anyway.

Chapter 17

Alice and Christopher stayed at the café for another hour. Alice was pleasantly surprised by the unexpected turn of events; what began as a kind of obligatory duty on her part ended up being quite enjoyable.

Christopher was funny to talk to. He possessed a dark sense of humor and frequently cracked jokes at his own expense. She assumed this was a defense mechanism he'd developed over the course of his life, a way of getting in with a joke before anyone else had the opportunity to.

It was something of an eye-opening experience. Alice liked to think of herself as basically a kind and decent person, but she wondered if she would have ever spent any time with someone like Christopher under normal circumstances. She remembered how she looked at him – how everyone had looked at him – the first time they all saw him on the night of the meeting. It was with a mixture of embarrassment, pity and repulsion. Despite being raised not to judge a book by its cover, sometimes the cover was so abnormal that it was impossible not to.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they finally parted company. Alice left the café and wandered over towards the bus stop, but had a change of heart along the way and decided to walk instead. She didn't know where this sudden urge came from; the journey home was about two hours by foot. But it felt like the right kind of day for it.

She was in a buoyant mood. The disappointment from earlier, when Needlemouse had bailed on her, didn't really bother her anymore.

A strange kind of feeling had drifted over Alice in the past hour or so. It wasn't anything she could quite put her finger on, but she was overcome by an unusual sense of calm. She felt lighter, like she was walking on the moon. The dark fog that had dogged her for the last few weeks had lifted. Colors seemed more vivid, like they popped out at her. The world around her appeared to glow a little brighter than usual.

She felt an invisible weight lift from her shoulders, as the problems she'd been struggling with melted away. They didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. It had been years since she felt this good.

She had no idea what had triggered this sudden rush of inner peace. For a long time now she'd been on something of a plateau, trudging her way through life experiencing neither highs nor lows. Maybe after confronting such a stressful situation head-on and coming out the other side in one piece, as she had done in

these past couple of weeks, she'd experienced some sort of breakthrough.

She reached the bus stop and kept walking, oblivious to the fact that she had an ear-to-ear smile on her face.

For that one brief moment, everything seemed alright with the world.

Alice's sunny disposition quickly evaporated the moment she arrived home and found a thin brown envelope slipped under her front door. This envelope was larger than usual – A3 sized – and it was blank, but she didn't need to see a return address to know who it was from.

Inside she found a photograph of Levi Sassmannshausen, another of the lottery contestants. It was a new photograph, different from the mugshot taken on the night of the meeting. This one showed Levi emerging from a taxi and dragging a suitcase behind him. He looked nothing like his original photo, which depicted a well-groomed, sharply-dressed young professional. He now wore a baseball cap, sweatpants, and what appeared to be a bad wig. His face was hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses and a three-week beard.

The flipside divulged Levi's updated personal information. He was now known as Irvine Halpern, having recently changed his name by deed poll. His current residence was room 103 at the Traveler Inn Motor Lodge, a fleapit motel located an hour out of the city.

The Consortium was sending the contestants a message, and it had been received loud and clear: there was nowhere for them to hide. Levi had tried hiding, and he was found straight away.

The thought of leaving town and changing her name if things became too intense had also crossed Alice's mind. She now saw that this would achieve nothing.

Surveillance was so pervasive and all-encompassing that there were few places one could go for absolute privacy anymore. The photograph of Levi looked like it had been sourced from CCTV, or perhaps a surveillance craft. Anytime you were out in public you had to assume you were being watched.

Even inside your own home, you could not be completely safe. The feds didn't have to bug suspects' houses anymore; thanks to the ubiquity of modern appliances vulnerable to hackers, most people did the bugging for them. Cameras, microphones and motion sensors were built into nearly every electronic device on the market. The product manufacturers always insisted that these were secure and unable to be hacked into, but there was no way to guarantee this. Once something was plugged into the network, it could easily be compromised. Just about any private residence could be invaded with the right equipment and knowledge.

It was shortly after Alice arrived home that she began her downward spiral. Within a matter of minutes she was incapacitated by feelings of nausea and severe anxiety. It was as if her whole body had given up trying to function. She felt suffocated, like an invisible anaconda was wrapped tightly around her body and gradually squeezing the life out of her.

She crawled into bed and stayed there for the next three days.

She had no idea what had brought this on. One minute she was happy and free, like she didn't have a care in the world. The next, she was mentally preparing her final words.

She wondered if maybe she had inhaled fumes from the passing motorists on her walk home, and those feelings of inner peace and goodwill were actually the early symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.

This was as sick as she had been in years. She hadn't felt this bad since the time she was withdrawing from Xylox. That period of her life was a deep, dark pit of misery, and one she had absolutely no intention of ever revisiting.

Elixia Pharmaceuticals unleashed the wonder drug known as Xylox onto an unsuspecting world eight years ago. It was an immediate success, proving to be an effective treatment for a range of ailments. It was an antidepressant, a painkiller, a stress reliever, a weight-loss supplement, a sleep aid and an anti-anxiety cure, all rolled into one miraculous white capsule.

It was also the most successful treatment available for drug dependency; ironic, given that a significant proportion of the people who tried Xylox ended up addicted to it. For the most part, it simply turned the wrong type of drug addict into the right type.

Not only did Elixia help win the war on drugs, they also discovered a way of transforming junkies from a burden on society into a lucrative consumer demographic.

Four years ago, Alice broke her wrist after being knocked down by a moped while crossing the street. It was nothing too serious, but she did suffer some recurring pain and discomfort. She had only just started at *The Daily Ink*, and she didn't want to miss too much work, so she asked her doctor to write her a prescription for Xylox. The doctor didn't need to be asked twice; Elixia enjoyed a cozy relationship with the medical profession, and doctors were showered with generous kickbacks every time they recruited a new

patient into the Xylox family.

Elixia's ultimate goal was to introduce Xylox to the entire population – whether they needed it or not. They would have put it in the water supply if only the government allowed it.

For Alice, Xylox was a miracle cure. Her ailments quickly disappeared and she was able to get on with her life.

But it wasn't long until Xylox *was* her life.

She started taking it whenever she felt fatigued – which, given the hours she was putting in at her new job, was most of the time. She'd take another dose when her mood was low; her low moods usually coinciding with periods when she stopped taking Xylox. Pretty soon, she was taking it just to take it. Instead of taking it when she was sick and fatigued, she needed it to avoid feeling sick and fatigued all the time.

This all occurred around the time she was still dealing with the shock of her mother's sudden death, as well as Lachlan abruptly disappearing for the first time. Both of these events contributed to her mental instability, making her all the more susceptible to addiction.

Three months after she started, she was barely able to set foot outside the house without pharmaceutical assistance.

That was when she began supplementing her daily allotment with lemon drops, the low-grade Xylox knockoffs manufactured by Goliath and sold on the streets for a fraction of the price. They weren't as good as the real thing, but if she took enough at once they made her life slightly more bearable.

(The authorities were eager to shut down Goliath's operations, devoting many millions of dollars and thousands of police hours towards achieving this. It wasn't so much the health implications or the crime issues that troubled them; it was more that the counterfeit pills were cutting into the profit margins of one of their major corporate sponsors.)

Alice's daily routine involved forcing a handful of white and yellow pills down her throat just to make it through the workday, then crashing back down to earth at around nine p.m. every night.

Her rock bottom moment came after she'd been addicted for almost a year. She found herself back in her doctor's office, having burned through another two month prescription in less than three weeks. The doctor sensed her desperation and informed her that it was unsafe to continue taking the pills in the quantities she was consuming them, and he would not be writing her any more prescriptions.

He then went on to say that if she could demonstrate that she was "mentally imbalanced" in any way, or if she could somehow prove she had an "insatiable physical desire" for Xylox, he would make an exception and

write her a new script.

Alice interpreted this request, along with the leering grin that accompanied it, as an invitation to trade sexual favors in exchange for the pills. And for one brief moment she actually considered going through with it. But she was mercifully struck by a moment of clarity. She recognized that she had a serious problem and got out of there as quickly as possible.

Rehab was available, but out of the question on the money she was making. She was left with little choice but to quit cold turkey. This was an agonizing process, and it was months before she was able to function as a normal person again. When she finally returned to work, she struggled to make it through the day alive. Her career momentum was derailed after missing weeks of work. She watched as her peers attained promotions and advanced their careers, while her own went nowhere.

As unpleasant and uncomfortable as her symptoms were before she was prescribed the pills, it was nothing compared to the daily torture she endured while she was withdrawing. That was definitely an experience she didn't ever want to relive. The same way that many recovering alcoholics refrained from drinking by reminding themselves of how bad their hangovers were, Alice simply had to think back to that awful period of withdrawal whenever she entertained the idea of touching Xylox again.

It was an idea she entertained, ever so briefly, when she opened her medicine cabinet to retrieve some aspirin and saw the ten lemon drops she had purchased from Gidget a few weeks back. The thought vanished from her mind just as quickly as it appeared, but it was there nonetheless. She instantly dismissed this; she knew what would happen if she ever succumbed to temptation. Her pain would disappear temporarily, then return with interest the moment the drugs wore off.

And yet something prevented her from throwing those ten lemon drops out. She was supposed to dispose of them as soon as she bought them, and the only reason she bought them in the first place was to get information from Gidget about where she could buy a gun. But it seemed like such a waste. It would be like flushing a hundred dollars down the toilet.

She knew that keeping the pills wasn't worth the risk. But what else was she going to do with them? She could try selling them, but that wasn't something she particularly wanted to do. A criminal record would not do her career any good, and she made a point to avoid contact with zombies if she could at all help it. Besides, she would be lucky to recoup one-fifth of what she paid for them.

She reached for the bottle of aspirin and made a mental note to flush the pills ASAP.

Chapter 18

Detective Olszewski leaned back in her chair and expressed a long sigh of frustration.

She glanced out the window of her office to make sure she was alone. The police station's corridors were empty. It was late, and most of her colleagues had done the sensible thing and left for the day.

She reached for the small bottle of vodka hidden beneath a stack of papers in her desk's bottom drawer. She always kept an emergency supply on standby for moments just like this.

The cause of Levi Sassmannshausen's (aka Irvine Halpern) untimely demise was fairly easy to ascertain. His body had been discovered in a bathtub at the Traveler Inn Motor Lodge, the victim of an apparent electrocution. Forensics were investigating the circumstances surrounding his death, which presently fell under the heading of suspicious. It wasn't unheard of for people to electrocute themselves in the bath, such as when a hair dryer accidentally fell in. But in this case, foul play seemed almost certain; the door to the motel had been kicked off its hinges, Levi was fully clothed, and severe bruising covered the entire left side of his head and face.

The fact that the electric heater in the tub was attached to a fifteen-foot extension cord was also a good indication that something sinister was afoot.

Footage obtained from a nearby surveillance craft showed two unidentified assailants fleeing the motel and escaping in a stolen vehicle sometime around three a.m. The burnt-out shell of the car was later found by the side of the road, some twenty miles away. At present, the suspects remained at large.

Detective Olszewski rubbed her eyes. Here was yet another dead body to emerge in recent weeks under suspicious circumstances. It was another family to notify. Another pointless investigation to launch; one that was unlikely to ever reach a definitive conclusion.

But she didn't need an investigation to know what was really going on here. Levi Sassmannshausen was simply another contestant in that stupid lottery. And now he was simply another corpse in the local morgue.

Olszewski had spent close to a decade in the field of law enforcement, but for the first time in her career she seriously contemplated throwing in the towel. This wasn't what she had signed up for. She was an idealist who wanted to defend the rights of those less fortunate than her, giving a voice to the voiceless and putting away anyone found guilty of exploiting the underprivileged and the oppressed. She shouldn't have to spend her

days cleaning up after a bunch of rich psychos and their twisted competitions.

But whenever she tried raising the issue with her superiors, she was quickly shut down. None of them wanted to know about it. She suspected this was due to the fact that the billionaires and trillionaires bankrolling the lottery were also some of the police force's most valuable sponsors. No one was prepared to look too far into these contests if it could end up affecting their weekly paycheck.

Alice Kato had told her there were twenty-seven contestants in the lottery this time around. Levi Sassmannshausen was only the sixth to be eliminated, which meant she had twenty more bodies to look forward to in the coming months. This would be a massive waste of resources for an already underfunded police force; resources that could be better spent protecting the public from the scourge of drug dealers and zombies running rampant on the streets. Resources that could be spent investigating the kidnapping of Emilia Ulbricht by a bunch of self-righteous activists. Resources that could be used to track down and arrest the homicidal maniac calling himself Goliath.

She wondered about Alice Kato, and how someone as bright and level-headed as she appeared to be could get herself mixed up in something like this. It didn't take long to reach an obvious conclusion: it was the money that drew her in. The same way that money was responsible, in one way or another, for the majority of crime that crossed her desk on a day-to-day basis.

Everyone has their price.

Something told her this contest would be different from the last one, held a few years ago. A lot of that had to do with the staggering value of the final prize pool – one hundred million dollars.

Even the most morally upstanding person might contemplate taking a life or two when that amount of cash was dangled in front of them. Even the most fatalistic person might start to get a bit nervous when the people around them were being bumped off in rapid succession.

The last tontine was rumored to have had sixteen participants and a twenty million dollar prize pool. In that instance, the bodies started mounting within the first two weeks. The whole thing concluded eleven months later.

Detective Olszewski raised the bottle to her lips and took another generous sip. She savored the warm feeling of calm that trickled down her throat, then spread to the rest of her body. This was smooth, high-quality stuff. Expensive, but one of the small indulgences she treated herself to ever since she graduated to a detective's salary.

She screwed the lid back on and stashed the bottle in its usual hiding spot, then reached for her APhID

and called home. Her husband answered. She told him not to bother waiting up for her tonight.

She also told him not to book that holiday they had been planning just yet.

Chapter 19

TERRORISTS RELEASE KIDNAP VICTIM

The Daily Ink

21 February, 2067

Emilia Ulbricht, the daughter of AFX Entertainment CEO Ethan Ulbricht, was released from her six-month kidnapping ordeal yesterday.

Ms. Ulbricht was taken hostage by terrorist organization Discordia last July in retaliation to the arrest of the group's leader Lukas Ormsby.

"The only thing that matters now is that our loving daughter has been returned to us, safe and well," Mr. Ulbricht said via his press officer. "She has suffered a great deal at the hands of these criminals, and we ask that our privacy be respected while Emilia takes the necessary time to recover."

Ms. Ulbricht was admitted to the St. John Of God hospital following her release, where she was being treated for the psychological trauma endured during her ordeal. She is not believed to have suffered any physical harm.

Police are yet to make any arrests over the kidnapping, and have appealed to the public for information regarding the whereabouts of the Discordia members.

It was recently revealed that Lukas Ormsby had been released without charge shortly after Ms. Ulbricht's disappearance.

Police maintain that the kidnapping of Ms. Ulbricht played no part in their decision to release Ormsby.

[Subscribe now to view the full story]

Emilia Ulbricht Press Release

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their support and wellwishes over the past few days.

However, there have been many false stories and misconceptions circulating regarding to my “ordeal”, and I feel I have a responsibility to clear these up.

First of all, Discordia is not a terrorist organization. Far from it. No matter what way you spin it, the definition does not apply to them. They do not use fear or violence to illustrate their point or achieve their means. They use their brains to devise more provocative and cerebral ways of holding a mirror to society. Highlighting our hypocrisies and double-standards may be uncomfortable, and the natural response is to attack those doing the highlighting, but the truth often is uncomfortable.

With regards to my kidnapping, the members of Discordia publicly stated from the beginning that I would be afforded the same rights as Lukas Ormsby, who by that stage had been deprived of his liberty for over five months. This is not entirely accurate. Unlike Lukas, I was never held in solitary confinement for weeks on end. My parents’ house was not raided by the police. My friends were not dragged in off the street and roughed up by police officers at the behest of their corporate benefactors. I was not subjected to beatings, threats, sleep deprivation, or other illegal interrogation techniques.

In fact, when Lukas was finally released, my “captors” informed me that I was free to leave whenever I wanted. I insisted on serving my full 196 day sentence, to match the time that Lukas was held in custody, as a matter of principle. I may come from a much wealthier family, but that doesn’t make my false imprisonment any more unjust.

Finally, despite what my father and his PR flunkies may want the public to believe, I have not been brainwashed, nor am I suffering from Stockholm syndrome or post-traumatic stress disorder. I have simply had my eyes opened to the ways of the world, and shown how the rich and powerful abuse their authority on a daily basis, all because they can get away with it.

Emilia Ulbricht – 24 Feb, 2067

Chapter 20

There were multiple ways one could ingest Xylox.

Swallowing was the safest and most common method. Those who took Xylox primarily for medical reasons generally consumed it this way. The effects took twenty to thirty minutes to kick in.

Snorting was common among those who took Xylox for recreational purposes. Approximately half the snorted chemicals in a crushed pill entered the user's bloodstream via the nose's mucus membrane. The remainder was swallowed and traveled down to the stomach, where it then entered the bloodstream. The full high was experienced within fifteen minutes of snorting. Generally, only irregular users of Xylox favored this method, due to the damage that prolonged insufflation could wreak on the nose's cartilage and septum.

Injecting was an option for some hardcore users, but this practice was not widespread. The time and preparation required for shooting up – crushing a pill, cooking it up, sucking the mixture into a syringe, tapping a vein, then plunging the needle in – was often more trouble than it was worth.

Instead, most of the truly committed Xylox connoisseurs (aka zombies) preferred to smoke their drug of choice. This involved breaking a pill into smaller pieces, placing it on a square of tinfoil, holding it over a flame, then inhaling the intoxicating fumes through a straw or a bic pen.

This was how Alice got high, alone in a bathroom cubicle, at her place of work.

The hit was near-instantaneous, and the effects amplified. The chemicals were drawn into her lungs and rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream, then transferred to the bodily receptors within seconds. Her muscles relaxed, and that gnawing pain she felt drilling into the back of her skull for the past three hours vanished.

She sucked in another hit. This one felt almost as good as the first. Her misery evaporated as the Xylox raced through her body like a euphoric dose of anesthetic.

It had been so long since Alice had gotten her hands on some genuine pharmaceutical-grade Xylox that she'd forgotten how good it could be. Up until now she'd had to make do with lemon drops, the low-grade knockoffs that she bought from Gidget on the street. But this stuff was the real deal. No unpredictable side-effects. No foul aftertaste.

Alice had spotted a small blister pack inside a commuter's purse on the train ride to work that morning, and she didn't think twice about swiping the lot. It was a completely reckless and brazen act, and she would

have been arrested if she was caught. But she got away with it. Alice justified her behavior by telling herself that somebody else would have stolen it if she didn't get to it first.

It was common sense not to leave Xylox out in the open like that. The woman was practically begging for someone to come up and steal it.

She slumped back and rested her head against the cold tiles. Her body, normally a clenched fist, relaxed into an open palm. Moments like this allowed her to forget that her life was falling apart, disintegrating into one endless nightmare.

Alice used to see swarms of zombies doing exactly what she was doing now; huddled beneath bridges and congregating in the park, smoking the Xylox they'd just bought with the proceeds of a carjacking. She would pass judgment on them, viewing them all as a subhuman form of life.

Even when she recommenced her dalliance with Xylox, she never imagined that she'd end up as one of them. But she tried smoking it once, just to see what it was like, and that was all it took. She wanted to stop, but the compulsion was simply too powerful to resist. If there was a line separating Xylox abuser and zombie, she had well and truly crossed it.

She remained on the bathroom floor for another ten minutes. She knew it was a haven for germs, but she was far beyond caring. She would have stayed like this forever, if only she could.

But as much as she would love to get high all day, she still had a job to do. It was a job she despised, but it was also a job she needed.

She climbed to her feet and braced herself for the inevitable self-loathing that would stalk her once the Xylox wore off.

She washed her hands at the basin and made a half-hearted attempt at pulling herself together. She did her best not to look like a junkie, but had only limited success.

She scooped up a handful of water from the tap and swallowed. It felt like shards of glass going down her throat.

A thin layer of sweat stuck to her face like cling wrap. She wiped her face down, and hoped that her appearance wasn't too ghastly.

She avoided the mirror. She didn't need to be reminded of how awful she looked. It was a shock whenever she inadvertently glimpsed her reflection somewhere. She no longer recognized the gaunt creature with limp hair, sallow skin, blackened fingertips and dead eyes looking back at her. Her features had become so distorted that it was like looking into a cracked mirror.

She still wasn't entirely sure how she ended up like this. One minute she was fine, having been clean, sober and healthy for years. Then it was as if someone flicked a switch, and she had relapsed.

As much as she tried shaking it off, her addiction kept coming back to her like undeliverable mail. It consumed her life, and she once again found herself enslaved by the drug.

A low point came when she realized that she would now be willing to whore herself out to her former doctor in exchange for a Xylox prescription. The sad irony was that in her present condition, even a creep like him wouldn't be interested in her.

She took a breath before heading back to her cubicle, still wondering how everything could have possibly gone so wrong. Her previous sensible life was now nothing more than a distant memory.

All in all, it had been one harrowing year.

Unless they had the misfortune of being touched by terminal illness, few people in their twenties spent a great deal of time reflecting on their own mortality. But for Alice, thoughts of death consumed nearly every waking moment. Even on rare occasions when she was temporarily able to push them from her mind, it took only a small reminder – such as finding another brown envelope slipped underneath her door – to drag her back to that dark pit of despair.

She now accepted that death was coming for her. Death came for everybody, of course, even if most people were unwilling to admit it. But Alice knew it could leap out and surprise her at any moment now. In fact, it was more than likely. A statistical probability. She was living on borrowed time.

The more she came to accept her impending demise, the more she came to see it as no great tragedy. The world would hardly be any worse off with Alice Kato no longer a part of it. She had made no significant contribution to society. With her gone, there would just be one less person taking up space.

She doubted few would mourn her passing. Lachlan might, but only because he was obliged to.

Most of her friends had drifted away in recent years. They would probably be sad upon hearing the news, then forget about it soon enough and carry on with their lives.

Dinah would be upset; mostly due to the fact that she would have the arduous task of hiring and training Alice's replacement.

As for her father, she figured he'd care about as much for Alice in death as he did in life.

At least in accepting her death, Alice was coping better than many of the other contestants in the lottery.

Some had gone to great lengths in trying to outrun the inevitable.

One such contestant was Levi Sassmannshausen. He had changed his name and altered his appearance, before fleeing town and hiding out in a cheap motel. His electrocuted body was discovered submerged in the bathtub a few days later.

Another contestant, Abigail Tevez, took even more extreme measures. She beat another contestant to death in the street with a claw hammer, then immediately surrendered to police. It appeared her logic was that she would be much safer in prison than out in public. She could serve out her term, and still be in the running to collect the prize money when she was released.

It sounded good in theory, but six weeks into her thirty-five year prison sentence she was found dead in her cell, hanging by a bed sheet.

Lianne Levy even made an attempt at faking her own death. Upon hearing of a deadly train crash nearby, she rushed to the scene and managed to sneak past the rescue workers, then tossed her identification and other personal belongings into the wreck. This led police to conclude that she was one of the passengers on the train who had perished in the crash. The contest organizers weren't so easily fooled, and duly informed the other contestants of her present whereabouts.

A short time later, Lianne's family grieved for her a second time.

Many contestants wished to withdraw from the lottery, but had no idea of how they should go about this. One was Arash Amirpour; he delivered letters to all the remaining contestants informing them that he was voluntarily removing his name from the lottery, thereby forfeiting any chance of ever claiming the money.

The contestants all received a second letter from the organizers a few days later. It instructed them to disregard Mr. Amirpour's letter, and reminded the participants that the \$100 million would not be paid out until all but one contestant remained.

Chapter 21

Alice came to an abrupt stop when she noticed the brand new silver Volkswagen parked directly opposite the entrance to *The Daily Ink* building. Even from this distance, she could recognize the driver.

Bourke Nation. He was here, outside her place of work.

She quickly backtracked around the corner and hoped she hadn't been spotted.

Scores of questions flooded her mind. How long had Bourke been sitting there? Was he waiting for her? Was this the first time he had been here?

It was only due to luck that Alice noticed him tonight. The elevators had broken down earlier in the day and she was forced to exit via the stairwell, which led to a door at the side of the building. Had she left through the front entrance like she usually did, she probably wouldn't have seen him.

She was set on edge from the moment she laid eyes on him. What were the chances of Bourke stumbling across her by accident? Unlikely. The old Alice might have brushed this off as a mere coincidence. The new Alice no longer believed in such a phenomenon.

She stood back and observed him from behind the corner of the building. Bourke's sudden reappearance in her life had rattled her – this was the first time she had seen the cocky loudmouth since Naomi's funeral, more than a year ago – even if she didn't quite know what exactly bothered her so much. It wasn't as if the streets were deserted; it was daylight, and there were still plenty of people around. She wasn't in any immediate danger. She doubted Bourke would be foolish enough to try anything with so many witnesses. And there was nothing in his demeanor to suggest that he meant her any harm. For all she knew, he had dropped by just to talk to her.

Alice had developed a chronic habit of blowing every instance in her life all out of proportion, adding unwarranted significance to the insignificant. Maybe she was doing it again.

Minutes passed, and neither one moved. Her eyes stayed firmly on Bourke, while Bourke kept his eyes firmly on the building's entrance.

Alice wondered how much longer they could keep this up, and which one would crack first.

She could have left without Bourke seeing her. But she wanted to stay. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of letting him out of her sight just yet. She much preferred to be the one watching him, knowing something

he didn't, rather than the other way around.

Another twenty nerve-grinding minutes elapsed before Bourke eventually grew bored with waiting. He pulled out of his parking space and sped off down the road.

Alice didn't move until his taillights faded from view.

Another brown envelope was awaiting Alice upon her return home that night.

She often wondered about the exact purpose of placing the cards inside these envelopes. The contest organizers could just as easily have slipped the cards under the door as they were. Maybe concealing them was all part of the Consortium's mind games; keeping the contestants in suspense, letting them know that someone had died but not telling them who it was straight away.

Discovering another envelope always provoked a queasy feeling of dread. Alice maintained a Schrodinger-like belief that the contestant wasn't really, officially dead until she opened it up and saw their photograph. Sometimes she delayed doing this for as long as she could bear it. She believed this extended their life – in her mind, at least.

She didn't bother with any such superstitions tonight and tore it open straight away.

This envelope contained two cards instead of the usual one.

The first showed Tory Weller, a twenty-five year old waitress. The second showed Chadwick Lyons, thirty-three and unemployed. Both contestants had "ELIMINATED" stamped across their smiling faces.

She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer for the two dead strangers. Two deaths closer to her own.

She pinned the cards to her wall, next to the other sixteen.

Her wall of death resembled a macabre bingo card. Twenty-seven spaces, one for each contestant, and eighteen now filled in.

Only nine remained.

The lottery had become a modern day bubonic plague, tearing through the population and leaving a trail of death and destruction in its wake.

Alice was still none the wiser as to the circumstances surrounding all these deaths. Was there a single person going after the money, bumping off each contestant one by one? Or were there multiple killers, like Detective Olszewski suggested, where the most frightened and weak-willed struck out at the ones they deemed the biggest threat? There didn't appear to be any discernible pattern to the killings. And how did they

get to Abigail Tevez, the woman found dead inside her prison cell?

Maybe god was striking them all down, punishing them for their sins of stupidity and greed.

Whatever the true cause, Alice knew it wouldn't be long before her own photograph occupied a space on the wall. It was only a matter of time. Nobody can outrun their fate.

In those first few months when the contestants started dropping off, she lived in a constant state of apprehension. She feared she might be taken out at any given moment. But she couldn't keep that up forever. Living that way was like trying to drive a car by looking only through the rear view mirror. She had to let her guard down eventually and go about her life as if nothing was wrong.

She had come to accept her fate. If someone was going to get her, they were going to get her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Her only hope was that it would be quick and painless.

The Eliminated Contestants

NAOMI DUKE (2032-2066) Found dead near her home on 7 September. Cause of death was massive head trauma. Reported to have been struck by a falling component that had come loose from a surveillance craft. ASE Industries, the owner of all surveillance crafts in the area, strongly deny any culpability. Investigations are ongoing, and a lawsuit is currently in progress.

VICTORIA MALSEED (2033-2066) Died 12 September after falling from the twenty-first floor of her apartment building. Following a brief investigation, police ruled her death as accidental and are not treating it as suspicious.

ROQUE FENTON (2040-2066) Died 14 September from multiple stab wounds to the chest and neck. Carson Dowling named as the prime suspect in his murder.

CARSON DOWLING (2028-2066) Died 15 September from a single OBL-IV gunshot wound. The chief suspect in the death of Roque Fenton, Mr. Dowling was shot by police in the apartment of Alice Kato after charging at them with a deadly weapon. An inquest later cleared the police of any wrongdoing, ruling that they acted appropriately under the circumstances.

JORDAN BRADLEY (2020-2066) Died 29 September. Surveillance footage shows an unidentified male pushing Mr. Bradley into the path of an oncoming truck. Police are yet to identify the assailant, who fled into a nearby subway station and remains at large.

IRVINE HALPERN (née LEWIS SASSMANNSHAUSEN, 2041-2066) Died 21 November from electrocution. His body was discovered submerged in water in a motel bathtub, alongside an electric heater. Police are treating his death as a homicide, although no arrests have been made.

ANTHONIE BYRNE (2019-2066) Died 10 December from strangulation. A coroner later ruled his death to

be accidental, a case of autoerotic asphyxiation gone wrong.

LUCILLE CRENSHAW (2022-2067) Died 20 January from injuries sustained during an automobile accident. Her car was discovered at the bottom of a steep embankment after veering off the side of the road, crashing through a barrier and rolling several times. Police speculate that Mrs. Crenshaw may have fallen asleep at the wheel, although a witness claims she was run off the road by another vehicle.

JAXON SCHEFERMANN (2038-2067) Mr. Schefermann's body was discovered on the banks of the Milton River on 29 January. An autopsy revealed he had suffered severe blunt trauma to the head, and was likely to have been dead or unconscious before being dumped in the river. Investigations are ongoing, but police currently have no leads.

ARASH AMIRPOUR (2028-2067) Died 4 February from an overdose of counterfeit Xylox. An autopsy revealed he had ingested more than seventy pills. Coroner ruled his death as a suicide, although the deceased left no note, and neighbors reported hearing a struggle in the hours before his body was discovered.

BRANDON HIRST (2022-2067) Died 23 March. Suffered fatal injuries after being struck multiple times with a claw hammer whilst walking his dog. Abigail Tevez pleaded guilty to his murder and was sentenced to thirty-five years imprisonment.

ISABEL HUME (2041-2067) Died 1 May from carbon monoxide poisoning. Discovered in the front seat of her car, parked in her garage with the engine running. An apparent suicide, although police have not ruled out the possibility of foul play.

MIA GORDON (2030-2067) Died 17 May from smoke inhalation. Discovered in her home by fire fighters after a blaze broke out late one night. An investigation blamed the fire on a faulty power board.

ABIGAIL TEVEZ (2044-2067) Found dead on 29 June in her cell at the O'Hara Women's Correctional Facility, where she was serving a thirty-five year sentence for the murder of Brandon Hirst. Prison authorities have ruled her death as a suicide.

LIANNE LEVY (2036-2067) Believed to have died on 11 July after her identification and personal belongings were found in a carriage of a fatal train wreck that claimed the lives of twenty-two people, although no body was recovered. She was later found in a dumpster seventeen miles away on 29 July. Cause of death was ruled to be strangulation. Police are unable to explain the circumstances surrounding her death, which was the focus of an episode of the popular television program *Unresolved*.

STEPHEN PORTER (2043-2067) Died 14 August from injuries after being attacked by a pack of savage dogs. Mr. Porter's body was found chained to a power pole, with over three hundred lacerations to his face, neck, arms, legs and groin. Police said the death displayed all the hallmarks of an underworld hit, although the victim was not known to have had any involvement in criminal activity.

TORY WELLER (2042-2067) Struck by a car while crossing the road on 22 August. Died from her injuries in hospital three days later. The car was later discovered abandoned by the side of the road after being set on fire. Police are still searching for the driver.

CHADWICK LYONS (2034-2067) Died 25 August from asphyxiation. An autopsy revealed a large volume of PVC glue had been poured down his throat, blocking his airways. Police are treating his death as suspicious.

The Remaining Contestants

REID CHATHAM (2031-)

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

FRASER DUNN (2029-)

HARRISON ESTER (2017-)

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

BOURKE NATION (2028-)

NICOLA ROCHE (2030-)

MELISSA SIEBEL (2038-)

Chapter 22

At five minutes to nine on a wet Tuesday night, the stretch limousine pulled up outside the Japanese restaurant. Alice saw the unusually tall man step out of the vehicle and enter through the front door.

Two months earlier, she was riding the bus when she spotted the same man leaving the same restaurant. She jumped off at the next stop and hurried back, only to find that he had vanished. She asked the staff if they knew who he was, but none could offer any clue as to his identity. A waitress told her the man was a semi-regular diner, but other than that she knew nothing about him.

So Alice returned to the same place night after night, shivering and sweating through every type of weather event, watching and waiting from the bus shelter across the road in the vain hope that she would see him again.

Now, at long last, he had returned.

A slight feeling of panic set in, like she almost didn't know what to do next. After waiting so long, she could barely believe he was actually there.

She crossed the road and pressed her face against the window, just to make sure it really was him.

There was no mistaking it. This was the man she was looking for.

This was the Messenger.

It felt strange seeing him in this context – sitting alone at his table in the corner, perusing the menu and behaving very much like an ordinary citizen.

An image of the Messenger, the enigmatic go-between she briefly encountered all those months ago, had lived inside her head for so long that she thought she may have dreamed him up.

She wasn't quite sure of the best way to handle the situation. For the past two months, she had formulated different plans as she watched the customers come and go, rehearsing what she would say if she ever saw him again. Now the time had arrived, and her mind was an empty void. None of it seemed appropriate.

But she'd waited too long to let this opportunity slip away. She knew she couldn't allow herself to overthink it. She simply had to walk inside the restaurant and take a seat opposite.

And so that was exactly what she did.

The Messenger glanced up from his APhID when Alice sat down at his table uninvited.

The first thing Alice noticed was his dark eyes. They were about as close to black as eyes could be

without actually being black. Alice saw that she had been mistaken – the Messenger wasn't the slightest bit ordinary. His appearance was otherworldly, not quite human. Something closer to a pod person.

Seconds passed without either one opening their mouth.

The Messenger held the stare for a small eternity, looking down at her from his elevated vantage point, before finally ending the awkwardness.

“Is there something I can help you with, Alice?” he said.

Alice froze. He knew her name. He knew who she was. Presumably, he knew why she was here. At least that would save her some time.

She took a breath, and forced herself not to blink.

“Take a look under the table,” she said in a low voice.

The Messenger didn't move a muscle. It was as if Alice had spoken to him in Latin. She was beginning to call her whole strategy into question.

“Take a look under the table,” she repeated. She colored her words with as much force and menace as she could summon.

Still nothing.

And then the beginnings of a faint smile. The Messenger remained inanimate for a moment longer – long enough to let her know that he wasn't particularly intimidated by her performance – then lifted the corner of the red and white checkerboard tablecloth.

He peered underneath and saw the barrel of a homemade firearm looking back at him.

He returned to his upright position, a picture of calm.

He looked back at Alice, sizing her up from the other side of the table. He knew she meant business – even if she was overdoing it slightly. But he could see the fury behind her eyes. If she was reckless enough to carry an illegal firearm around with her in public, she was far beyond caring about the consequences.

“I'm just a messenger,” he said. “Don't shoot the messenger.”

Another volatile silence hung in the air.

“Are you familiar with that saying? ‘Don't shoot the messenger’. That's one phrase that has always troubled me. It implies that from time to time, messengers actually do get shot.”

Alice was thrown by this reaction. It barely seemed to bother him that an unhinged woman nearing the end of her tether was threatening him with a deadly weapon.

This scenario was turning out a lot different to how she imagined it.

“The gun works, by the way,” she said.

Alice regretted saying this almost as soon as the words passed her lips. Why would anyone state that a gun worked unless it didn't? She supposed it was technically true. The gun did fire bullets when the trigger was pulled. Just not in the intended direction.

“Where did you get that?” the Messenger said. “Did that pervert on Carling Crescent make it for you?”

Alice could feel whatever upper hand she had rapidly slipping away. She had to wrest control of the situation and remind him that she was the one in charge.

“Here's what's going to happen,” she said. “You and I are going to leave the restaurant in a calm and orderly fashion. Then you're going to—”

The Messenger held up his hand, and Alice immediately fell silent. She didn't know how or why this happened. That was just the kind of power he had over her.

He held his gaze for a moment longer. The longer his stare lasted, the more Alice shrunk in her seat.

“What's your plan here, Alice?”

“My ... plan?”

“What do you think you can do to get out of this? Force me at gunpoint to contact the client and order them to remove your name from the lottery?”

Alice opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Her plans were something along those lines. It was only now, when they were spoken aloud, that she realized it sounded a little silly.

“I was just thinking, if you—”

She choked on her words at the worst possible moment. Her ordeal was only getting worse. She prayed for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

When that didn't happen, she cleared her throat and pressed on.

“If you could have a word with your bosses, and ask them to—”

“For a start,” the Messenger interrupted, “they are not my ‘bosses’. They are the client, and I am a freelance employee. They have no control over me.”

“But you work for the Consortium, don't you?”

She noticed Messenger's eyebrow twitch almost microscopically.

“You've done your homework, well done. Yes, the Consortium have hired me in this particular instance. But they are not my only client. Anyone can hire me. *You* could hire me, if you could afford my fee. What the Consortium and I have is nothing more than a simple business transaction. No loyalty exists between us. The

client does not particularly value my wellbeing, nor do I value theirs. So threatening to harm me will do nothing to affect the outcome of the lottery. And you turning up here, acting crazy, waving a gun around in public – keep that up and you're on a fast track to elimination. You'll need to fly under the radar if you're to stand any chance of surviving.”

A stack of plates smashed in the kitchen. Alice's already frayed nerves were jarred even further. An argument filled with raised Japanese voices soon followed.

“You may think I have power, but I don't,” he continued once the commotion had died down. “I'm a minor cog in their machine. I have no say in any of this. If you want my personal opinion, I don't particularly care for these contests, nor do I agree with them morally. But my role is not to ask questions, or to form moral judgments. I only do what they pay me to do.”

There was a drawn-out pause as Alice took this all in.

“So why do you do it?”

The Messenger blinked twice as he mulled this over. “I'm not sure I understand your question.”

“I was just wondering – if you object to these contests, if you find them barbaric, then why are you still involved with them?”

The Messenger shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I wasn't given much of a choice.”

“Of course you have a choice! Nobody forces you to do it, do they?”

“Nobody put a gun to my head, if that's what you mean. But I'm just an ordinary person. And when ordinary people are presented with extraordinary amounts of money, free will becomes something of an elastic concept.”

A waiter appeared at the table, and a bowl of miso soup was placed before the Messenger.

The waiter then vanished as quickly as he appeared.

“Just like nobody put a gun to your head and forced you to enter the lottery. And nobody forced any of the contestants to start killing one another. But you know how it is. Money makes people do strange things. Everyone has their price.”

Alice's feelings of helplessness only intensified with every passing minute. For perhaps the first time since the lottery began, it finally dawned on her that there was nothing anyone, anywhere could do to avoid the inevitable.

The lottery was going to be the end of her, and that was that.

She rose slowly from her seat, in some sort of daze.

“I’m sorry about all this,” she said, fighting the onset of wooziness. She stashed the gun inside her jacket, the bulkiest item of clothing she owned, before anyone else could see it. “Enjoy your meal.”

She turned and hurried for the exit. The room tilted as she lurched towards the door. Her stomach convulsed and her face burned up. A toxic combination of humiliation and dread.

She pushed the door open, and was hit in the face by a blast of cold air.

A few facts about the Messenger:

The Consortium employed the Messenger to take care of the various duties with regards to their gambling-related activities. As head coordinator for all their contests, it was his job to ensure everything ran smoothly and without incident.

He acted as a liaison between the Consortium and the contestants, outlining the rules and ensuring they were being adhered to.

He kept the thirteen Consortium members up to date on the progress of each contest.

He oversaw the monitoring of each contestant, employing a small army of private investigators, surveillance experts and hackers to follow their movements and keep a close eye on each one.

When a contestant was eliminated, the Messenger delivered the news via the brown envelopes to the remaining participants once the death had been verified.

The current Messenger was the third person to hold this position.

Messenger Number One was employed by the Consortium shortly after the group’s inception in 2052, and was responsible for the management of the first and second lotteries. He remained in this position until his retirement due to ill health in 2059.

His replacement took over the contests for the next three years, until he was killed by a disgruntled participant while the 2062 lottery was in progress. This participant had been pushed to breaking point by the contest, and resorted to desperate measures when attempting to have his name removed from the list of participants.

Following Messenger Number Two’s death, three members of the Consortium were awarded bonus prizes of \$150 million for correctly predicting that this would occur.

WILL OF ALICE OLIVIA KATO

30 August, 2067

I, Alice Olivia Kato, of 1204/550 Hickory Crescent, Rivercliff (Citizen Identification Number: 41-946-162-915), hereby make this will and revoke any and all prior wills and codicils.

I declare that I am of legal age to make this will, and that I am of sound mind. This last will expresses my wishes without undue influence or duress.

I am not married and have never been married.

I have zero (0) living children.

Beneficiaries – I give my property to the following person(s):

To my brother, Lachlan Abel Jeremiah Reese, I bequeath one hundred percent (100%) of whatever crap I have remaining in and around my place of residence at the time of my death, should he survive me. If he does not survive me, I request that every one of my remaining possessions be destroyed.

In the unlikely event that my bank accounts are not depleted or overdrawn, the total value is to be withdrawn as cash and bequeathed to the first homeless person encountered whose Christian name begins with a vowel.

I direct that on my death my remains are to be cremated. Under no circumstance is there to be any maudlin symbolic scattering of my ashes, such as from a mountaintop or in a field of daffodils. Instead, the remains are to be disposed of in the method deemed to be the most convenient and least sentimental (e.g. deposited into the trash).

In accordance with the Removed From History Act of 2039, I hereby request that my name, image and likeness be expunged from all public records.

I direct my executors, without appointment against any beneficiary or other person, to pay all estate, inheritance and succession taxes (including any interest and penalties thereon) payable by reason of my death.

I request that no funeral or memorial service be held in my honor.

NICOLA ROCHE (2030-2067) Died 2 September. Witnesses reported seeing her car lose control as it traveled around a bend and crashed head-on into a power pole. An investigation later revealed that her brakes had been tampered with. To date, no arrests have been made.

The Remaining Contestants

REID CHATHAM (2031-)

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

FRASER DUNN (2029-)

HARRISON ESTER (2017-)

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

BOURKE NATION (2028-)

MELISSA SIEBEL (2038-)

Chapter 23

Everything happened so quickly.

The speeding car seemed to materialize out of thin air. It drove straight at Alice, on the wrong side of the road with its headlights switched off.

She was on her nightly walk home from the station to her building, a journey of less than two blocks, but often felt closer to two miles, when she heard the unmistakable high-pitched whine of a vehicle accelerating toward her at great speed.

She knew it was coming, but her feet wouldn't move. Her entire body locked up. It was as if she had unknowingly waded into rapidly-drying cement. The cliché about traumatic events playing out in slow motion proved to be terrifyingly true.

She snapped out of her trance and dived out of the way, a split-second before the car was due to smash into her from behind. She felt the rush of displaced wind against her face as it missed by millimeters.

The car mounted the sidewalk and clipped a bollard, before coming to an abrupt stop when it rammed a shopfront. The sound of the shop's shrieking alarm drowned out all other noise in the area.

Alice had no trouble getting her body moving this time. She scampered to her feet and ran for her life, escaping down a darkened alleyway.

She crawled into a secluded spot between two putrid dumpsters and waited. Blood pumped through her veins at such an accelerated rate that she worried her heart was about to give out.

Even though she had been living in a constant state of fear for the past year, this was different. This wasn't her imagination getting the better of her. This was an unequivocal attempt on her life.

She could just make out the sound of the car reversing onto the road and taking off over the incessant screech of the alarm.

The alarm was shut off a short time later, and an empty silence took its place. Minutes passed.

She felt safer now, but was she really? The street lights in the alley were all busted, creating one elongated stretch of complete darkness. It would be all too easy for someone to hide in the shadows and pounce when she least expected it.

She knew she couldn't just sit there and wait for her attacker to come after her. They were probably on

their way now. She was a sitting duck if she stayed where she was.

She crawled out from behind the dumpsters and crept down to the end of the alley. She peeked tentatively out into the street.

A few cars passed, but not the one that had tried to run her down. At least, she didn't think they were; she didn't really get a good look at it. She didn't know the make or the model. She wasn't even sure of the color, other than to say it was a dark color.

A diner was open on the opposite side of the road, a few doors down. A dozen patrons were inside. She would be much safer in there than out on the street.

She triple-checked to make sure the coast was clear, then stepped out onto the road.

She was less than halfway across when the car tore around the corner without warning. It sped towards her and screeched to a stop, inches away from her toes.

The front door flew open.

"Get in!" the driver shouted at her.

Alice turned to stone. This was like being trapped in sleep paralysis. She was scared out of her mind, but unable to do anything about it.

It took her a moment to realize that this was not the same car that had tried to run her down minutes earlier. This was a much older model, a battered station wagon.

"Alice, it's me!" the driver said. "Morgan."

Alice drew a blank. She didn't know anyone called Morgan, and she had never seen this man before in her life.

And then it hit her – Morgan Compston, from the lottery.

They had met just the one time previously, following Naomi's funeral. He was the guy in sweats with glasses and a ponytail. The unemployed computer programmer.

She quickly dived into the front seat, and Morgan planted his foot to the floor. The car sped away before Alice could pull the door closed.

"Are you okay?" Morgan said.

"I'm fine," Alice responded, more of a polite reflex than an accurate summation of her wellbeing.

Morgan checked the rear view mirror. "Is he following us?"

Alice twisted her body to look behind her. A few cars were out on the road, but none that were exhibiting suspicious behavior.

“I don’t think so,” she said. She took a moment to catch her breath. “Jesus, who was that?”

“You shouldn’t be walking the streets alone,” Morgan said. “Especially not at this time of night. Where’s your car?”

“I, um, it’s ...” Alice paused for a moment to rearrange her thoughts. “Wait, how did you know I had a car?”

“That first night I saw you, at the meeting. You were parked next to me.”

The fact that Morgan had remembered this came as a surprise to Alice, especially as she had no memory of him from that night. She only had a very vague recollection of talking to him after the funeral. Morgan had the kind of face you forgot seconds after meeting him.

“I sold my car,” she said. “It’s a long story.”

Morgan slowed down as he neared a red light, and the chaos of the moment slowly dissipated from view.

It wasn’t until another few minutes had passed, when Alice’s adrenaline levels returned to a more manageable level, that her brain alerted her to the peculiarity of Morgan’s abrupt reappearance in her life at the exact moment she required his help.

Her eyes moved slowly around the car.

Morgan had a tire iron and a can of mace, both within arm’s reach.

Screens displaying digital maps and feeds from surveillance crafts were mounted on the dash.

A pair of handcuffs and a sledgehammer lay ominously on the back seat.

It was enough to trigger the warning bells inside Alice’s head.

“What’s going on here?” she asked warily. “How did you know someone was after me?”

Morgan let out a protracted sigh. “That,” he said, “is a much longer story.”

Chapter 24

“The car that tried to run you down tonight is registered to Bourke Nation. I think he’s responsible for the deaths of at least two contestants. Maybe more, I don’t know. But there are at least two that I can pin on him so far.”

This revelation created a vacuum of silence.

The mere mention of Bourke Nation’s name was enough to make the hairs on the back of Alice’s neck stand up. She thought there was something going on when she saw him out the front of *The Daily Ink* building a couple of weeks back. Now her suspicions had been validated.

“Do you have any proof?” she asked.

Morgan shook his head. “I’m still working on that part. I’ve been following him for the past few months. I can place him in the general vicinity of two contestants shortly before they died, but nothing concrete yet. He’s pretty skilled at covering his tracks.”

“You’ve been following him?”

“I’ve attached tracking devices to all his cars.”

Alice looked up. “All his cars? How many does he own?”

“Four, at last count. He switches between vehicles and alters his routine to avoid drawing attention to himself. He seems to know what he’s doing.”

Morgan fell silent when a waitress came by with their order. He thanked her with a polite smile, then waited until she was out of earshot before continuing.

“I’ve been trailing him every time he goes out,” he said. “Tonight wasn’t the first night he’s stalked you, by the way. He’s followed you at least five or six times already.”

Alice’s eyes widened. “Five or six?”

Morgan nodded. “Tonight was just the first time he’s tried anything.”

Alice wasn’t quite sure how to feel about this. Part of her wished that Morgan had let her know earlier that she was in danger. Another part of her thought that maybe this was something she was better off not knowing.

“Does he know you’ve been following him?”

“Not until tonight. Maybe he does now. Who knows, maybe we got away without him noticing.”

Alice sipped her tea. It was a bit too tart for her tastes, but she drank it anyway for the calming effect it had on her.

“How long has all this been going on?” she said.

“I first suspected something when I ran into him a few months back. It was a completely random encounter. I just happened to be walking past when I saw Bourke parked by the side of the road. I thought it looked a bit suspicious, since he was just sitting there doing nothing, and I knew he didn’t live in the area. But I didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

Morgan was silent for a moment. He stared into his coffee.

“Three days later, there was a fire at Mia Gordon’s place. When I saw the address, that’s when everything clicked into place. That was the house Bourke was parked out the front of.”

Alice recalled the Mia Gordon incident clearly. She had died from smoke inhalation after a fire broke out in her home. Firefighters had difficulty gaining access to the house because all entry points had been blocked, with beds and bookshelves pushed in front of the doors and windows.

An investigation later traced the source of the fire to a faulty power board.

“For the longest time after Mia died, I blamed myself.” Morgan’s eyes remained low as he spoke. “I could have warned her. Or I could have done something to scare him off.”

He took a minute to gather himself. The only sound now was the cheesy muzak the diner had playing unobtrusively in the background.

“Anyway, that’s what I’m hoping to do now. I want to stop him before he gets to anyone else. You know, I just found out he’s remortgaged his house. He’s taken out a five hundred thousand dollar loan.”

“What does that prove?”

“It proves he’s serious about winning this thing. He’s using the money to pay private investigators to keep tabs on the other contestants. He’s paying cash for unregistered second-hand vehicles so he can get around without arousing suspicion, and he sets them on fire when he’s done with them. And I think he might be paying zombies to do his dirty work for him. Remember Jordan Bradley, that guy who was hit by a truck? Witnesses said it was some dirt merchant who came out of nowhere and shoved him in front of the truck. I wouldn’t be surprised if Bourke paid him to do it.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to make of all this. It was a lot to take in all at once.

“That’s quite a commitment, borrowing all that money,” she said.

“Not really,” Morgan shrugged. “Either he wins the lottery, in which case he’ll have no trouble paying the

money back, or he gets eliminated, and then it won't be his problem anymore.”

Alice shook her head with wonder. She was still having trouble reconciling the man sitting opposite her with the nerdy guy she met at Naomi's funeral.

Morgan Compston looked nothing like he did a year ago. The greasy ponytail and pasty complexion were gone, along with the glasses and fleece sweats. His hair was cropped short, and he was dressed in black jeans and t-shirt. He was a lot less doughy, with a physique that could just about pass for athletic. It was almost as if he had discarded his former self and transformed into a completely different person.

Alice's appearance had also drastically altered compared to one year ago, but for different reasons.

“So what do we do from here?” she said.

“If I haven't blown our cover, I'll carry on tracking him. He won't be able to keep this up forever. Sooner or later, he has to slip up. It's only a matter of time. He's clever, but he's no criminal mastermind.”

“So we just sit around and wait until he kills again?”

“I know it's not ideal, but there's not a lot more we can do at this stage.”

“Have you thought about calling the police?”

“If the police get involved and they don't have enough evidence, it won't do us any good. Bourke will just learn to be more cautious. The biggest advantage I've had up until now is that he didn't know I was onto him.”

Alice tugged nervously on her sleeves. She yanked them down over her fingers.

She always wore long sleeves these days, mostly out of necessity. She did this to cover her charred fingertips, and to hide the red scratches crisscrossing her arms. Her blackened fingers were the result of her regular Xylox smoking, while the scratches were a side-effect from the chronic itching that plagued her whenever withdrawal pangs became too intense.

“There is one other thing we could do to stop him,” she said quietly.

Alice was unsure whether she should expand on that thought any further. But she didn't have to; Morgan knew what she was getting at.

“That's not a good idea,” he said, shaking his head.

“I know it's not something we really want to think about. But it would solve a lot of our problems.”

“Would it? I think all it would do is drag us down to his level. And we'd be doing exactly what the people behind the lottery want us to do. We're better than that.”

“I know it's wrong, morally—”

“It's also wrong legally.”

“But ultimately, isn’t it *more* wrong if we do nothing?” Alice’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “If Bourke kills again, won’t that make us culpable?”

Morgan thought long and hard before answering. He lifted his cup to his lips and swallowed down the remainder of his coffee.

“Don’t think I haven’t considered that option already,” he said. “The truth is, if I had it in me to take the life of another human being, I would have done so by now. But I don’t.”

He leaned back in his seat and let out a sigh.

“And I don’t think you do either.”

FRANKENCORPSE DISCOVERED IN DUMPSTER

The Daily Ink

7 September, 2067

Police were horrified to learn that a body found in a dumpster yesterday was actually a patchwork corpse, made up of as many as seven deceased people.

A garbage collector contacted police after making the gruesome discovery early Sunday morning. It wasn't until the body had been taken away for autopsy that it was revealed it consisted of multiple dismembered parts that had been stitched together.

Investigators are using DNA and dental records in an effort to identify each of the victims. They may also release images to the public of prominent birthmarks, tattoos, and other distinguishing features, in the hope that someone will recognize them.

Despite displaying all the hallmarks of a Goliath hit, police are yet to establish any link between the grisly find and the notorious crime figure.

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FRASER DUNN (2029-2067) DNA records proved that parts of Mr. Dunn's body, including his left foot, right ear and three fingers, were found on the so-called "Frankencorpse" discovered in a dumpster at the rear of a hardware store on 7 September. Investigations are ongoing, but police are yet to make any arrests. The remainder of Mr. Dunn's body is yet to be recovered.

The Remaining Contestants

REID CHATHAM (2031-)

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

HARRISON ESTER (2017-)

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

BOURKE NATION (2028-)

MELISSA SIEBEL (2038-)

Chapter 25

Bourke glanced at his watch. It was creeping up towards eleven p.m., and his target was nowhere to be seen. Where the hell was she?

The corner of his eye caught the flash of the blue and red lights of a police cruiser. This triggered an intense rush of heart palpitations. A feeling of dread ascended to his throat.

Calm down, he told himself. You're not doing anything illegal. Nothing anyone can prove, at least. You're just a regular guy in a late-model silver Volkswagen, minding his own business. Nobody has ever been arrested for sitting in his car.

He slid down in his seat and held his breath while the cruiser passed behind him. He remained in that position until it was out of sight. A few seconds elapsed before he allowed himself to exhale.

He knew he had nothing to fear, but he couldn't be too careful.

Alice Kato was fast becoming the lottery's most frustrating contestant. When he first commenced his stalking of her a few weeks back, he assumed she'd be the easiest one yet to bump off. At little more than five feet tall, she was the least physically imposing of the remaining contestants. Not only that, he was fairly certain she was a Xylox addict. He had followed her to some of the seedier parts of town, where he watched her consort with questionable characters in secluded alleyways. Taking her out would be like shooting fish in a barrel with an OBL-IV.

She should have been a pushover, but Alice was proving to be anything but. He had his chance last week, but somehow messed it all up. She was right where he wanted her, and then he lost her. He still didn't quite know how she managed to escape so quickly.

She disappeared, and he hadn't seen or heard from her since.

Maybe she had skipped town. But if that was the case, the people behind the lottery would have informed him of her whereabouts. He could only assume she was still residing at her current address.

He took another deep breath and reminded himself to relax. Restraint and self-control were the keys to ultimate success. Impatience would lead to carelessness, and carelessness would lead to getting caught.

Getting away with murder wasn't anywhere near as hard as Bourke thought it would be. Most people who get caught do so because they kill in the spur of the moment. They end up making it worse when they panic

and do a mediocre job of covering it up. So much trouble and heartache could be avoided if only they took a little time to plan.

Bourke had already gotten away with offing four of the lottery's contestants. He had cut the brakes on Nicola Roche's car. He had run down Tory Weller in the street. He started the fire inside Mia Gordon's house. He strangled Anthonie Byrne and made it look like an act of onanism gone wrong.

He was methodical, and he was meticulous. He stalked his prey for weeks, studying them from a distance and identifying their weaknesses, before deciding on the best time to strike. He made sure every track was covered, and no loose end remained untied. He knew that if he allowed himself to become undisciplined it would undoubtedly lead to his downfall.

The fact that the city's police department was sorely underfunded also played to his advantage. They lacked the time and resources to look too deeply into every single death, and took an Occam's razor approach to their investigations. If something appeared to be an accident, they simply assumed that it was.

But now, his killing spree had ground to an unfortunate halt.

Maybe Alice escaping would prove to be a blessing in disguise. It was a timely reminder that he not get too far ahead of himself. He hadn't won the lottery just yet. There were six more contestants standing between him and the money.

He hung around for another few minutes before he finally grew tired of waiting. He started his car and pulled out into the road.

He'd catch up with Alice Kato, sooner or later. She couldn't hide from him forever.

Alice bristled as she sat in the front passenger seat of Morgan's station wagon, watching Bourke Nation as he watched the entrance to her building. She thought she might have felt better to know that there really was someone out there trying to kill her, and the threat didn't just exist in her imagination. But that wasn't the case at all.

It now felt like a line had been crossed. Bourke was outside her home. He was invading her life. This was a lot more personal.

"Can we call the police now?" she said, folding her arms tight around her. The night was mild, but she still shivered.

Morgan shook his head. "All he's doing is sitting in his car."

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

There was a slight quiver in Alice’s voice as she spoke.

“Hey, I don’t blame you for freaking out,” Morgan said. “I’d probably freak out too, if I was in your position. But trust me, we have Bourke right where we want him. He doesn’t know we’re onto him, and that works to our advantage. If the police get involved, that will only scare him off. He might fly under the radar for the next five or ten years, and then reemerge when we’re least expecting it.”

Alice nodded to herself. She knew this made complete sense, even if it did nothing to ease her anxiety. But she trusted Morgan. He appeared much more adept at handling this sort of thing than she could ever hope to be. She could barely formulate a single coherent thought with everything going on around her.

Tonight was the third night in the past week she had gone along with Morgan on a stake out. He had continued to track Bourke’s movements, and he made sure to warn her every time Bourke was coming her way. He also chauffeured her to and from work, insisting that using public transport left her far too exposed.

Bourke appeared to be going after the contestants one at a time, and right now he had Alice firmly in his sights. Morgan’s theory was that if Alice continued to elude Bourke, he would be frustrated to the point where he would slip up and do something reckless.

The more time Alice spent with Morgan, the more impressed she was. She also couldn’t help but feel a tiny bit inadequate by comparison. Morgan had risen to the challenge when the pressure mounted. He had completely reinvented himself in the past year, almost to the point of becoming an entirely new person. Alice had gone in the opposite direction; she had crumbled in the face of adversity.

Some more time passed as they waited for Bourke to make a move.

Alice opened Morgan’s glove compartment to pass the time and absentmindedly rifled around inside. She unearthed a flashlight.

“Careful with that,” Morgan said.

Alice switched it on. A beam of light shot out. “I know I’m not quite as skilled as you at this sort of thing,” she said, holding the flashlight underneath her chin to cast an eerie shadow across her face. “But I think I can handle a simple flashlight without injuring myself.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Morgan took the flashlight from her. He flicked a switch on the base, then handed it back.

“Try it now,” he said.

Alice turned the flashlight back on. A shock of electric blue current zapped out from the top.

“Whoa!” Alice blurted out in fright. “This is a taser as well?”

“Yep,” Morgan nodded.

Alice examined the device. “Where did you get this from?”

“I made it.”

“You made this yourself?”

“Well, you can’t buy them in stores, can you?”

Alice smiled. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

She held the taser in front of her face and zapped it again. The smell of burnt copper filled the car.

“Easy with that,” Morgan said, quickly pushing it down out of sight. “You’ll drain the battery. Besides, the law takes a dim view on people who manufacture homemade weapons.”

“This isn’t legal?”

“It might be legal somewhere. But not on this continent.”

As if on cue, a police car drove by with its red and blue lights spiraling.

They followed the car with their eyes, then watched Bourke as he slunk down in his seat to avoid being seen. Even from this distance, his nervousness was apparent. This brought a smile to Alice’s face.

They lapsed into silence. It was a comfortable silence, the kind where neither one felt the need to fill the space with empty words.

“Do you regret putting your name down for the lottery?” Alice asked several minutes later.

Morgan was lost in thought for a moment as he contemplated this. “That sounds like a simple question with an obvious answer, doesn’t it?”

Alice shrugged.

“On one level, yes I do regret it. If I could go back and make my decision all over again, knowing then what I know now, obviously I’d take the money upfront.”

A short pause followed.

“But having said that,” he continued, “part of me is grateful that this has happened to me.”

“You’re grateful?”

“Its just that ...” Morgan let out a soft sigh. “You have no idea how much of a rut my life was in. I was living the same day, over and over. I hated my life. I wasn’t happy. I didn’t care about anything, and I didn’t feel anything other than trapped. Of course, the present situation is hardly ideal. But at least it’s given me some sort of purpose.”

His words hung in the air for the moment.

“That’s probably the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard, right? I’m not sure I explained myself all that well.”

“Actually, it kinda makes perfect sense,” Alice said quietly.

“So how about you? Any regrets?”

Alice cast her mind back to her sensible, comfortable life of one year ago. It felt more like twelve years had passed than twelve months. She would give anything to be back there now; to be able to collect her strings-free two grand and escape the unremitting hell this lottery had imposed on her.

But before she could put her thoughts into words, Bourke’s taillights lit up and his car reversed out onto the road.

REID CHATHAM (2031-2067) The mutilated body of Mr. Chatham was discovered in the bathtub of the Traveler Inn Motor Lodge on 21 September. Massive blood loss was recorded as the cause of death. Several of Mr. Chatham's vital organs had been removed, leading police to believe that he may have been the victim of an organ trafficking syndicate.

The Remaining Contestants

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

HARRISON ESTER (2017-)

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

BOURKE NATION (2028-)

MELISSA SIEBEL (2038-)

Morgan trailed Bourke for a further twenty minutes after Alice left, eventually following him all the way back to his inner-city loft. He parked outside and monitored the place for another two hours, before finally calling it a night.

Bourke had become something of an obsession for Morgan. He wasn't quite sure what had triggered this. There was the obvious answer of self-preservation. But it went beyond that.

When Morgan looked at Bourke, he saw someone who had always got what he wanted in life. Bourke came from money, and he never had to deal with any real hardship or adversity. He was good-looking, and he exuded confidence. He was the type who coasted through life while everyone else had to struggle. The type who always walked over guys like Morgan.

Bourke had won first place in the lottery of life, but he lacked the class and decency not to shove his good fortune in everyone else's face.

Maybe this was what riled Morgan the most. If it had been any other contestant, it may not have struck a nerve the way it did. But this was Bourke, and Morgan refused to allow him to triumph. Not this time.

Defeating Bourke wouldn't just be a victory for Morgan. It would be a victory for the underdog. The nice guy would win for a change.

The world was evolving. The betas had played second fiddle to the alphas for far too long. It was time to reverse the trend.

Chapter 26

Hi, my name is Georgina and I'm a full-time model and part-time escort. I just discovered I'm pregnant, and there is a one in three chance that Ethan Ulbricht is the father. I'm willing to sell my side of the story for \$50,000. This will cover an exclusive interview, first baby photos, results of the paternity test, the baby's first birthday and an exclusive extract from my upcoming tell-all autobiography. Call me back if you're interested.

Three hours still remained until the end of the working day, and Alice was counting down each passing second. She could barely tolerate her job now. Every day had become an eight-hour endurance test. It was as if she placed her head inside a vise at nine o'clock, and the screws slowly tightened as the day wore on.

Her days of boundless enthusiasm and soaring ambition had left her long ago. Staying late, putting in hours of unpaid overtime in order to get ahead; that was back when she cared. Now she got by on doing little more than the bare minimum.

By the time five o'clock rolled around she always promised herself that this was to be her final day, and there was no way she could possibly withstand another minute trapped inside this prison masquerading as a cubicle farm. But one thing always compelled her to keep coming back, and that was the money.

She could have left and joined another news and media service by now – she'd had numerous offers over the past few months – but the money she was raking in at *The Daily Ink* was simply too good to give up. Every Needlemouse-delivered exclusive resulted in a sizable bonus check, and there had been thirty-one of these in the past year. These checks then ended up in Gidget's pocket (who had welcomed Alice back with open arms following her relapse, despite his earlier warnings that he didn't want to see her around his part of town again), and her ever-increasing drug habit spiraled further out of control.

She didn't know how much longer she could keep this up. This was no way for anyone to live. Sooner or later, something had to give.

Every day, she prayed for a way out of her situation. She dreamed of scoring the biggest story imaginable, then using the massive bonus check to quit her job and get herself cleaned up. But in the back of her mind, she knew the chances of this actually happening were slim to none.

Dinah didn't even try concealing her exasperation with Alice and her erratic behavior anymore. She wondered where the Alice she used to know had disappeared to. Her downward trajectory had been ongoing for months now. There were the constant unexplained absences, and the dramatic change in her appearance. She would disappear from her cubicle without warning, then slink back hours later cloaked in chemicals and shame. Alice tried to pass this all off as a bad case of flu, but that excuse had a fairly limited shelf life.

She knew that Needlemouse was the only reason she hadn't been fired yet. For the past year her mysterious source had supplied her with a constant stream of Goliath-related tip-offs, which had played a big part in helping *The Daily Ink* remain the country's number one news and media service. Dinah would have fired Alice if she could have found a way of communicating with Needlemouse directly. But for reasons Alice never fully understood, Needlemouse insisted on going exclusively through her.

She glanced up at the clock. Two hours and fifty-three minutes to go. Another small part of her died inside.

She fought the urge to sneak off to the bathroom or the stairwell to finish off what was left of the Xylox she had purchased from Gidget earlier that morning. She had already done that twice today. A third time might be pushing her luck, even for her.

She closed her eyes and let out a desperate sigh. She prayed for a fire alarm, or a bomb threat. An actual bomb, even. Any excuse to escape the oppression of the office for an hour or two.

She opened her eyes a minute later and saw that her prayers had been answered. Her APhID glowed with a new message.

It was short and to the point.

Today is the day, Alice.

I can get you Goliath. 100% certain this time. It's going to happen.

Await further instruction.

Needlemouse.

She was out of her seat and heading for the door before her eyes reached the final word.

Alice hurried to make it to the agreed-upon location by seven o'clock.

Needlemouse had instructed her to meet up at this particular car park, situated directly above a public

housing building. These structures were known as “icebergs”; one floor was above ground, and fifteen to thirty were below. This was the city’s answer to the problem of poverty – out of sight, out of mind. No one enjoyed looking at the above-ground towers of dereliction known as “felony flats”, and so burying them beneath the surface provided the perfect solution. If the rest of society couldn’t see these eyesores, they could simply pretend they didn’t exist.

The car park was deserted by the time she arrived. She checked her watch, and saw that she was a couple of minutes early.

Alice stood there and passed the time by pushing a few rocks around with her shoe. A swarm of butterflies soon took up residence inside her stomach.

For the year-plus they had been communicating, Needlemouse had been promising her something big. Something huge. The prospect of a massive story had been dangled in front of Alice like a carrot in front of a donkey. And now, it seemed, that day had finally arrived.

She tried not to spend too much time thinking about it, but she couldn’t help but fantasize about what this would do for her career. It would undoubtedly catapult her into the big time. The story would be huge – as would the accompanying bonus check. She would finally be able to leave *The Daily Ink*, she would have enough cash to sort out all her problems, and she could make a fresh start somewhere else. It wasn’t as if there was any shortage of demand for her talents.

As excited as she was about what this could mean for her, she had to remind herself not to count her chickens just yet. Smarter and more accomplished journalists than her had been on Goliath’s trail before – not to mention the extensive police investigations – and yet he still managed to evade capture and keep his identity a secret. *The Daily Ink* had published so many exclusive “reveals” that it had turned into something of a running joke.

But this time felt different. This wasn’t some stab in the dark, outing someone as Goliath on the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence in order to provoke a quick spike in circulation. This was coming direct from her most trusted and reliable source. Needlemouse had an impeccable track record – thirty-one confirmed exclusives in the past year. They were either close to Goliath, or they knew someone in his inner circle. This was her best chance yet of landing something solid.

The sound of gravel crunching under the sole of a shoe came from behind. Alice spun around, and there she was.

Needlemouse.

A woman about Alice's age, maybe a few years older. She remained in the shadows, her face hidden beneath a black hood.

"You Alice?" she said.

"Needlemouse," Alice said. It felt a little strange to use her code name when addressing her in person. "Good to finally meet you."

A slight pause followed. Alice waited for Needlemouse to speak, but she stayed silent.

Her standoffish demeanor left Alice slightly unsettled. But that didn't bother her quite as much as the fact that Needlemouse was most likely a Xylox addict. The signs were subtle, but it wasn't hard for Alice to identify one of her own. This immediately gave her cause for concern. Xombies were hardly known for their reliability or trustworthiness.

"You have something for me?" Alice said, once the silence between them had lingered to an uncomfortable degree.

The woman nodded, but remained mute.

She stepped forward and pulled her hood back, and Alice caught a glimpse of her face for the first time.

She was taken aback when she saw how young Needlemouse actually was. She was still a teenager, but her addiction had wreaked havoc on her face. Her eyes were dead and vacant. Her skin was punctured with pockmarked craters. The flesh of her sunken cheeks clung to her skull like a cheap polyester sweater.

Alice tried not to let her revulsion show. She wondered if others had similar reactions when meeting her for the first time.

"You have something for me ... regarding Goliath?" Alice tried.

Needlemouse nodded again, but still didn't speak. Alice was quickly becoming exasperated by the one-sided nature of the conversation.

"Do you have it with you? Or should we go someplace else?"

"Do I have what with me?" Needlemouse croaked.

Alice battled to keep her cool and not allow her frustration to boil over. This was like trying to communicate with a Labrador. "Whatever it is you have for me."

Needlemouse looked at Alice as if she was making up a new language on the spot. Alice watched her hopes of landing a star-making, career-defining story fade by the second.

"Like a name, or footage, or photographs. Or any other documented evidence." Alice paused, hoping something would eventually click. "You know, of Goliath."

“Oh, no,” Needlemouse replied. “I have something much better than that.”

Alice exhaled with relief. Finally, they were getting somewhere.

“And what is that?”

“I have Goliath.”

Alice’s eyebrows knitted slightly. “What do you mean you have Goliath?”

Needlemouse grinned. Her remaining teeth were an identical shade of yellow as her skin.

“He wants to meet you. In person.”

A half-second after this news hit, Alice became aware that she was not alone. She caught a brief glimpse of the two men behind her.

Before she could react, the men had pounced on her and forced her to the ground.

A sack was pulled over her head, and her world plunged into darkness.

Chapter 27

Bourke's silver Volkswagen was sitting idle by the side of the road when Morgan found it. The headlights were on, and the motor running. The driver's side door was wide open. But there was no sign of Bourke.

An hour earlier, Morgan's tracking system alerted him that Bourke was out on the road again. He dropped what he was doing and jumped in his car to follow.

He remained somewhat hopeful as he neared the scene. Maybe this would be the night he would finally catch Bourke in the act.

An early indication that tonight would be different came when he saw that Bourke was not going after Alice, as he had been for the past few weeks. He was heading in the opposite direction – straight for Christopher Gibson's house.

Bourke appeared to have given up on Alice for the time being and was going after the easier target.

Morgan parked two streets away and traveled the rest of the distance on foot.

He spotted the Volkswagen up ahead. He crept up slowly behind it. He prepared himself for any nasty surprises.

He shone his flashlight inside the car. Nothing. It was empty.

He moved around to the driver's side and poked his head inside. Bourke's instruments of slaughter were spread throughout the car – a steel crowbar, a coil of nylon rope, a pair of pliers and a gas mask – but no Bourke.

Morgan left the vehicle and made his way over towards Christopher's place.

The house was a dilapidated dump that looked like a stiff breeze would cause it to collapse in a heap.

He waded through the overgrown weeds to conduct a quick sweep of the property. No one here, either. No one that he could see, anyway.

He peered through the dusty windows. There didn't appear to be anyone home. No lights, no movement. In fact, there didn't appear to be anyone living there at all. The house wasn't just empty – it looked abandoned. The kind of place squatters would have second thoughts about setting foot inside. The lack of wheelchair access also seemed a bit peculiar.

He tried the front and back doors, but both were locked. The windows, too. No sign of a break-in.

Morgan knocked on the door, before realizing how pointless this was. It was obvious no one lived there.

He made his way back out to the street. He stood there for a moment and tried to unravel this riddle in his mind. Whatever was going on here, he was stumped. There was no question that Bourke was somewhere in the area – or at least, he had been very recently – but now he seemed to have vanished into thin air.

A rush of footsteps came at him from behind, a split second before he was tackled and forced to the ground.

Morgan let out an involuntary grunt, as he hit the ground and the wind was knocked out of him.

His initial instinct was that this was Bourke launching a sneak attack. His theory was disproven when he caught wind of his attacker's putrid stench. It was someone with the body odor of rancid bacon. Most likely a xombie.

Two more miscreants swooped in from out of nowhere. One pinned him down by his shoulders. Another unraveled a length of duct tape.

Morgan thrashed around, face down on the ground, trying unsuccessfully to free himself from their clutches. His feet were forced together and the tape wound around his ankles.

Using every bit of strength he could muster, Morgan stretched his arm around and jammed his flashlight into his attacker's thigh.

He flicked the switch to taser mode, and fifty thousand volts of electrical current surged through the xombie's body. The shock propelled him ten feet backwards.

Morgan spun back around and shoved the flashlight-turned-taser into the second xombie's ribs. The stream of electricity sent him sprawling to the ground in agony.

The third xombie dropped the tape the instant he saw what was happening and escaped in a cloud of dust.

Morgan took a second to catch his breath, then stumbled to his feet. He tore the duct tape from around his ankles and sprinted back to his car as fast as his legs could move.

He dived behind the wheel and floored it.

He cursed his recklessness as he weaved in and out of traffic. Bourke had set a trap for him, and he had wandered straight into it. The whole set-up looked suspicious right from the start, and he still failed to twig.

Bourke must have caught onto the fact that Morgan was following him, and he used this knowledge to his advantage. He was paying xombies to do the actual dirty work, since Bourke didn't want to get blood on his three thousand dollar suit.

Bourke was onto him. Morgan would have to rethink his whole strategy.

His mind was still working overtime when he made it back home and discovered another brown envelope waiting for him.

A feeling of immense dread came over him. Had Bourke got to the others already?

It was with a great deal of trepidation that he retrieved the envelope from the floor. He slowly tore it open and reached inside.

He pulled out two cards, not one.

The first was to announce the elimination of Harrison Ester from the lottery. The second did the same for Melissa Siebel.

Morgan was struck by an gut-churning combination of guilt and relief. He was horrified by the two further deaths, and yet grateful to find that Alice wasn't among them.

But then it all fell into place, and Bourke's grand plan came into focus.

Bourke was going after the money now. He'd waited long enough, and he wanted the lottery to end tonight. Morgan had deliberately been led in the wrong direction in an attempt to throw him off the scent. With Morgan preoccupied, Bourke would be allowed to finish his killing without interference.

Bourke had already taken care of Harrison and Melissa today, and Morgan had very nearly become his third victim. Alice and Christopher would be next on his hit list.

Enough was enough, he said to himself. It was time to throw down the gauntlet. Bourke had to be stopped, one way or another. If that meant taking the law into his own hands, so be it.

Morgan returned to his car. He didn't know how he was going to do it, but he had to find Bourke.

He only hoped that he wasn't too late.

HARRISON ESTER (2017-2067) Collapsed inside an Aqua Bar outlet on his way to work on 5 October. Paramedics were quick to arrive on the scene, but were unable to revive him. A preliminary investigation found traces of arsenic in his apple and cranberry juice.

MELISSA SIEBEL (2038-2067) Died 5 October when her car veered off the side of the road and crashed head-on into a power pole. The collision occurred at low speed, and it is believed that Ms. Siebel was dead before the point of impact. A preliminary investigation found traces of arsenic in her morning coffee.

The Remaining Contestants

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

BOURKE NATION (2028-)

Chapter 28

The car sped over another pot hole, and Alice's head collided with the roof of the trunk for what felt like the fifteenth time in ten minutes. She was convinced the driver was doing this deliberately. But given her present situation, there wasn't a great deal she could do about it. She had a sack tied over her head, her legs and hands were bound with itchy fraying rope, and she was bundled into the trunk of a car with suspension so rickety she could feel every pebble and twig that it passed over.

She was in more pain than she thought any human being could possibly endure. She ached inside and out, like every nerve in her body was coming under attack. She would have traded her eternal soul for a single Xylox pill. The cruelest part of all was the fact that she had three remaining lemon drops hidden in her sock, but no way of reaching them.

Trapped inside the suffocating darkness of the car's musty trunk, she could do little else but inhale the noxious diesel fumes and curse her own stupidity. How could she have allowed herself to walk into a situation like this? The old Alice would never have done anything so utterly reckless. She was far too smart for that. She took the occasional risk, but they were always calculated risks.

But the old Alice was long gone. The new Alice had killed her, hidden her body, and assumed her identity.

The new Alice made dumb decisions and bad judgment calls. She participated in contests that coaxed ordinary citizens into wiping one another out. She ventured into deserted public housing icebergs to receive volatile information from questionable sources.

And now the new Alice's carelessness was going to cost the old Alice her life.

She tried not to think about her impending death. But the more she resisted, the more these thoughts kept forcing their way back into the forefront of her mind. She wondered how they would do it. Would it be quick, or would they make her suffer? The latter seemed more probable.

Maybe she would be decapitated, like Ricardo Ferguson had been a few years back. Or hacked to pieces and mailed to *The Daily Ink* in dozens of separate packages, like Adele Nemshich before him. Either way, it was sure to be as horrific and gruesome as possible. That was Goliath's *modus operandi*: kill the victim in such a way that one couldn't help but imagine what their death must have been like. The actual killing was simply a means to an end. The main purpose was to send a message, and that message was that no one ever

got in Goliath's way.

But the worst part about dying at Goliath's hand was that Alice would now be remembered as a martyr. She would be lionized as a fearless journalist whose quest for the truth ended in tragedy, and that was the last thing she wanted. Her only dying wish was to be forgotten. Being remembered as a hero was worse than the truth – that she was a greedy addict, killed by her own idiocy.

On the bright side, at least the story of her death would help bump up *The Daily Ink*'s circulation for the next week or two.

She felt the car slow down, before it finally came to a complete stop. The engine died. The car doors slammed shut, and the trunk flew open.

Two sets of hands grabbed her and pulled her out.

A door opened, and she was escorted inside.

Two goons were manhandling her, one on either side, dragging her along by her arms. Alice tried walking, but both men were so much taller that her legs could only move back and forth in mid-air, her toes barely brushing the surface of the ground.

They hauled Alice through two more doors, then dumped her on the floor.

The smell was the first of her senses to be assaulted. It was a pungent aroma she knew all too well. The stench of zombies, coming at her from every direction.

"Untie her," she heard a distant voice say.

The rope around her wrists fell away, and her hands were free. Her feet came next. The sack was yanked from her head without warning.

Alice squinted. She shielded her eyes from the bright lights shining directly on her face.

She looked around the room. She didn't have a clue where she was. It was a large, cavernous building, some sort of converted warehouse, filled with zombies. At least twenty, maybe thirty, lining the walls, staring at her like a zoo exhibit.

"Good evening, Alice," the voice said. It was a pleasantly nasal voice. One she found somewhat familiar, but couldn't quite place. Her eyes scoured the room, searching for the voice's owner.

"I've been expecting you," the voice added.

She spotted him on the opposite side of the room. The city's most mysterious and notorious figure. He was the psychotic butcher.

He was Goliath.

He sat behind his spacious mahogany desk, reclining in his custom-made padded leather chair that looked more like an emperor's throne. Piles and piles of cash, hundreds of thousands of dollars, were stacked before him in a Tetris-like formation.

Alice's mouth fell open. She tried speaking, but the words refused to come.

The room seemed to lurch, like she was a passenger on a ship caught in a raging storm. She worried that she might actually pass out, the way people on sitcoms did to comic effect when confronted with upsetting news.

Until now, Goliath didn't seem real to her. He was more of an idea, an abstraction. He had become so mythologized that Alice no longer regarded him as an actual person.

But that all changed the moment she saw him with her own eyes.

"I was wondering if we'd ever see each other again," Goliath said.

He let out a low chuckle. Alice's stupefied reaction had clearly amused him.

She attempted to make sense of it all. No, she kept saying to herself. No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. This was impossible.

But deep down, she knew that it also made perfect sense. This had to be him. The most ruthless and violent criminal in living memory. The man more powerful than any politician or corporate trillionaire.

This was Goliath.

Although Alice knew him by another name.

His real name was Christopher Gibson.

Chapter 29

It was indisputable that Xylox was a wonder drug. One little pill had the ability to turn chronic insomniacs into sleeping babies. Others went from depressed and suicidal one day, blissful and content the very next.

For Christopher Gibson, Xylox was the catalyst for an even more remarkable transformation. It turned him from an impoverished, overweight invalid into an extraordinarily wealthy, power-hungry megalomaniac.

The first thirty-five years of Christopher Gibson's life were a desolate haze of humiliation and mockery. He was fat and socially inept. His family drifted in and out of poverty. High school was six years of perpetual hell, and life didn't become any easier once he graduated. Haunted by chronic depression and crippling insecurity, he shut himself off from the rest of the world and ate his problems away.

His ballooning obesity and rapidly deteriorating health resulted in both his legs being amputated.

Friendless, broke, and confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life, he figured this was about as low as a human being could sink. His life couldn't possibly get any worse from this point on.

Strangely enough, he was right.

His doctor prescribed Xylox to alleviate the pain of his many physical and mental ailments. Christopher did enjoy the effects the pills had on him; that warm, fuzzy bear hug of contentment that temporarily assured him everything was going to be alright.

But the effect they had on other people was even more amazing. Every Xylox patient was only a short stumble away from becoming a Xylox addict, and once someone was hooked there was nothing they wouldn't do to get their hands on more.

Xylox became the latest lifestyle accessory, a new form of currency, and Christopher intended on taking full advantage of that fact.

Using his initiative and a previously untapped entrepreneurial spirit, he created false identities and doctor-shopped his way to accumulating a massive stash. Thanks to the lucrative kickbacks they received from Elixia Pharmaceuticals, these quacks were only too happy to write new prescriptions without checking to see if any other doctors had already done so.

With such a vast supply now at his disposal, other people suddenly needed him. For the first time in his life, he had something they wanted.

Ingesting Xylox pills may have given Christopher a rush, but it was nothing compared to the rush his newfound power delivered.

This small-time scam netted him a tidy profit, but Christopher harbored even greater ambitions.

His next move was to recruit a trio of pharmacy students who had recently been expelled for making and distributing LSD on campus. After bailing them out of prison and covering their legal costs, he employed them to reverse-engineer the Xylox and synthesize their own version. Christopher had the means, the students had the knowledge, and within a few months they had created a form of counterfeit Xylox.

Known on the streets as lemon drops, they may have been an inferior facsimile of variable quality (a bad batch could result in unpredictable side-effects, ranging from mild nausea to schizophrenic episodes), but addicts craving an immediate hit were in no position to be fussy. Christopher preyed on their desperation and flooded the streets with these cheap, mass-produced pills. In a matter of months, he was enjoying a wildly successful business venture.

Like any good entrepreneur he had identified a gap in the market, then sought to fill the demand.

In less than a year, Christopher was rolling in more cash than he knew what to do with. He enjoyed the kinds of profit margins the pharmaceutical giants could only dream of. He also amassed an army of zombies along the way; psychotic tweakers who would do anything he asked of them in exchange for a constant drug supply. And if that meant he wanted someone taken out – be it a rival gang member, meddling politicians, nosy journalists, or regular civilians who were participants in a strange contest with \$100 million up for grabs – they were only too happy to oblige.

The more people became hooked on Xylox, the more Christopher became hooked on power. It was the kind of power that had a tendency to corrupt.

Throughout it all, no one suspected a thing. Christopher's outward appearance, previously his biggest liability and the source of much of the misery throughout his life, was now his greatest asset. His weight and disability meant that people constantly underestimated him. Anyone who encountered this pathetic wheelchair-bound creature would never in a million years suspect him of being the city's most ruthless crime lord. The police force devoted countless man hours and many millions of dollars on tracking down the monster behind this incessant wave of carnage, and he didn't even have to hide. He was hiding in plain sight.

And so for the next six years Christopher Gibson, self-christened with the indomitable moniker "Goliath", wreaked his revenge on the world. He sought revenge on all those who had bullied and tormented him throughout his life. On a society that chose to point and laugh at a helpless sideshow freak rather than offer

sympathy. Most of all, he took his revenge on god for creating this colossal mistake of a human being in the first place.

He was god now.

Goliath's lair, a disused slaughterhouse in the city's industrial area that had undergone extensive renovations, was truly a sight to behold. From the faux-stone columns and archways, to the marble fountain, to the intricate wall design that gave the illusion of a crumbling colosseum, no expense had been spared. There was even a large portrait of Christopher seated on his throne, draped in regal robes and gold chains, a full-grown tiger resting by his side.

But this all paled in insignificance to the room's centerpiece and most striking feature. It was the one thing that commanded everyone's attention from the moment they set foot inside.

It was the cylindrical glass display case, filled to the brim with counterfeit Xylox pills.

It was insanely huge, almost fifteen feet in diameter, and made from glass two inches thick. The top of the case connected to the floor above via an opening in the ceiling. The pills were manufactured on the second level, and trickled down from a conveyer belt in a continuous stream.

The case was filled with what must have been tens of millions of little yellow pills, like it was the world's largest gumball dispenser.

Even though no practical reason existed for Christopher to store all his pills in this way, the purpose of the display case was obvious. It served as an ever-present reminder to all the zombies just what they were working for. It was their psychological motivator, should they ever need one. They craved pills, Christopher produced an endless supply, and there was nothing they wouldn't do to get their hands on their drug of choice.

"Good work, men," Christopher said to his zombie footsoldiers once Alice had been delivered to his feet. "Enjoy your reward."

He pressed a button on a small remote control dangling from a chain around his neck. The sound of a handful of pills dropping into the receptacle below followed.

This triggered an immediate Pavlovian reaction from the three zombies. They scurried across to collect their payment, greedily fighting one another for their share of the spoils.

Just as quickly, they scampered out of the room with immediate plans of smoking themselves into oblivion.

Christopher turned his attention back to Alice. He grinned as he rose from his seat.

“I have to admit Alice, I’m surprised to find you still alive,” he said. “You’re a tenacious one, I’ll say that about you.”

He moved slowly toward her, the smile widening on his face.

“I was positive you would have gotten yourself killed by now.”

Alice was so bewildered by everything she had seen so far that her brain had failed to pick up on the most astounding part of all – Christopher Gibson, a man with no legs, had risen from his seat and was walking towards her.

It wasn’t until he came to within a few feet that she lowered her eyes and glimpsed him from below the waist.

Christopher had sprouted new legs.

But these weren’t human legs. They were robotic appendages, the very latest in anatomical emulation technology, assembled from steel and plastic and fiberglass.

It was a peculiar, almost comical sight; these wiry mechanical limbs propping up Christopher’s morbidly obese body. He looked like the result of an explosion in a cybernetics factory, or a mad scientist’s experiment gone horribly wrong. A kind of a human/emu/robot hybrid.

What surprised her even more was the ease in which he moved. The legs boasted an impressive amount of balance and control, allowing him to glide around the room with the kind of grace and dexterity one would never expect from someone carrying close to four hundred pounds.

“I understand if this has all come as a bit of a shock to you,” he said. “But I am impressed that you’ve made it this far. I guess I misjudged you.”

Alice swallowed hard. “It seems we all clearly misjudged you, too.”

Christopher let out a tiny laugh. The gap in his front teeth produced a kind of whistling sound.

“You know, I think there’s a lesson to be learned in all this. People have underestimated me my entire life. But I refused to let it hold me back. In fact, I used it to my advantage. Everyone would look at me and see one of god’s greatest mistakes. No one ever saw the devil himself.”

A million different thoughts raced through Alice’s mind as she lay there helpless on the floor.

She wondered if she could now legitimately claim to have scored the all-time ultimate exclusive with Goliath. Not only was she the first journalist to uncover his true identity, she’d even spent an afternoon alone with him a while back.

She wondered about the cosmic significance of lying on the floor in agony, lightning rods of pain drilling into

her every nerve as withdrawal mercilessly ravaged her body, while just a few feet away was enough counterfeit Xylox to last until the end of time.

More than anything, she wondered how dirty this floor was, and what kind of infectious diseases she was exposing herself to.

“And I want you to know, Alice, I really don’t want to kill you,” Christopher continued. “To be completely honest, I’m a little sad that it’s come to this. I didn’t think I *would* have to kill you. I figured someone else would have done it for me a long time ago.”

He paused for a moment to catch his breath. Even with his mechanical legs doing all the heavy lifting, Christopher still fatigued easily. The sound of his labored breathing filled the room for half a minute.

“But it’s not up to me, unfortunately. The rule-makers were quite clear about that. I can’t get the money until every other contestants is dead.”

Christopher returned to his desk. He pressed his respiratory mask to his face and inhaled deeply.

Alice’s eyes darted around the room. There has to be another way out of here. But she only saw dead ends. There were windows, but they all had bars across them. There was the door they had brought her in through, but this was inaccessible – for two reasons.

The first reason was that it was on the opposite side of the room, more than fifty feet away.

The second reason was that about thirty zombies occupied the space in between.

The zombies watched Alice similar to the way vultures watched their prey as they waited for it to die. All were slaves to their addictions, and every single one of them was ready to tear Alice apart with their bare hands the moment their slave master gave the order.

Christopher pulled the mask away. His glazed eyes and dopey grin informed Alice that it was nitrous oxide rather than oxygen inside his tank.

He snapped his fingers. One of his zombie minions, a young man with dirty blond dreadlocks, rushed to his side.

“I think it’s time we brought this contest to its conclusion,” he said to the manservant, his voice now a lazy drawl. “Why don’t you go fetch our guest of honor.”

Alice was still unable to comprehend how she could have ended up in the position she was in. As much as she tried to figure it all out, she couldn’t make head nor tail of any of it. Much of her confusion was due being

kidnapped, bound and threatened, coupled with an inhumane case of Xylox deprivation. It all combined to create this incredible stress on her brain. The kind of pressure that could produce diamonds out of coal.

But irrespective of the circumstances, she would never fully understand the precise sequence of events leading up to the situation she presently found herself in.

She would never know that Christopher Gibson, aka Goliath, had been employing his vast army of zombies to bump off the lottery participants one by one. His first victim was Vicki Malseed; he paid a couple of zombies to throw her from the balcony of her twenty-first floor apartment and make it look like an accident. His most recent victims were Harrison Ester and Melissa Siebel, both of whom had been poisoned within the last few hours.

She hadn't yet caught onto the fact that Christopher was behind the whole "Needlemouse" persona. He slowly reeled her in, drip-feeding her information about Goliath in order to gain her trust and keep tabs on her movements. He thought she might catch on sooner or later, and wonder why these major scoops were being leaked to a lowly copywriter rather than a serious journalist. But she never questioned it. Alice was just grateful for the opportunity, and the lucrative perks that came along with it.

And she would never know that the one time they went to the café, after "accidentally" bumping into each other in the street, Christopher was moments away from slipping a small vial of arsenic into her tea. The only reason he didn't go through with it was because of how Alice had treated him that day – not as a freak, but as a human being. Christopher may have been a sadistic power-hungry drug lord with an insatiable lust for money, but a tiny sliver of humanity still lurked somewhere inside him. He couldn't bring himself to kill the one person who had treated him with dignity and respect, and who didn't immediately judge him by the way he looked.

But he wasn't quite prepared to let her get away that easily. So he dropped a small amount of powdered Xylox into her drink when she wasn't looking. It wasn't much, but it was enough to tip her over the edge. Christopher knew Alice was a recovering addict – he had used his contacts within the medical profession to bribe staff and obtain all the contestants' records – and he knew a single hit of Xylox would be enough to reawaken her long-dormant addiction. It was only a matter of time before the drug consumed Alice's life once more, and she would be so much easier to control.

This was his way of killing her slowly. Her addiction would weaken her defenses and leave her vulnerable to attack by one of the other contestants. Christopher wasn't the only killer in the lottery; of the twenty-three deaths so far, only twelve had been at his behest. The rest were paranoid people wiping one another out, although sometimes Christopher was the one to tip them over the edge – as Carson Dowling would ultimately

discover.

The many thousands of hours he'd spent in the high school chess club paid off as Christopher manipulated the other contestants like pieces on a board, shifting them into place and planning ten moves ahead.

After Christopher, Bourke Nation was the lottery's second-most prolific killer. He had personally taken care of four contestants, and he had gotten away with it each time. Christopher thought Bourke was such an effective killer that he allowed him to live a little while longer so he could carry on doing his work for him.

But Bourke's work rate had slipped in recent months. He was taking too long to finish the job, and Christopher was growing impatient.

Chapter 30

The dreadlocked xombie hauled the heavy brown sack through the door and dragged it over towards Christopher.

The xombie grasped the sack by the bottom and lifted it upwards. A squirming body came tumbling out the other end.

Alice didn't immediately recognize the body sprawled out on the floor. This was because most of the head and upper chest area was enveloped in a cocoon of duct tape. It wasn't until she noticed that it was clothed in a stylish gray suit that everything clicked into place.

This was Bourke Nation.

Bourke looked up at Alice, then around the room. Only one of his eyes was visible through the tape, but that was more than enough to convey his abject terror. That one eye belonged to a man trapped inside a waking nightmare.

Christopher stepped in front of him. Bourke's gaze slowly moved upwards, towards the freakish monstrosity standing above him.

"My employees tell me that you were lurking around my home earlier tonight," Christopher said. "Is this correct?"

Bourke attempted a response, but his mummified head could only produce a garbled string of gibberish.

The dreadlocked xombie tossed a six-inch hunting knife across to Christopher.

"They also tell me you were carrying this weapon with you at the time."

Christopher removed the knife from its sheath, inches away from Bourke's face. He ran his index finger along the razor-sharp edge of the gleaming blade, then shook his head like a disappointed school teacher.

"I have to tell you, Mr. Nation. This does not look good for you. It appears that you traveled to my place of residence with sinister intentions."

Christopher suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Bourke by his collar. He pressed the knife against his face, then slowly ran the blade across.

Bourke let out a wail of terror, until he realized that Christopher had only sliced open the tape covering his mouth.

Christopher laughed and let go, and Bourke fell back to the floor. He sucked in desperate gasps of air through the new opening in his mask of tape.

He coughed, and a mouthful of bile spilled out.

Alice didn't need to see the rest of Bourke's face to know how close he was to losing it. Unlike her, Bourke had absolutely no idea where he was or what was going on. Somehow, the contestant he mistook for a helpless cripple, by far the easiest target in the lottery, was in fact a deranged half-human/half-robot straight out of an HR Giger fever dream.

"Relax, I'm not going to waste my energy using that on you." Christopher said as he tossed the knife aside. "Too much work. Besides, I have something special planned for the two of you."

Christopher pressed on the remote around his neck. More pills were spat out from the display case into the receptacle. The dreadlocked zombie hurried across to collect his payment.

Christopher then returned to his desk. He unlocked a drawer and retrieved a small black case.

He placed it on his desk and clicked open the locks. He lifted out the contents.

Inside was a gun.

But it wasn't just any gun. Not like the gun Alice had illegally purchased, one of those twentieth century bullet and gunpowder models cobbled together from spare parts.

This was the real deal. Shiny, black and sleek. Exclusive to the police and military.

This was an OBL-IV.

The type of weapon that could tear a person in half with a single shot.

Just like the one the police used on Carson Dowling inside Alice's apartment.

Christopher handled the weapon delicately, like it was made of eggshell. He held it out in front of Alice and Bourke for their approval.

"What do you think of my new toy?" he said, a childlike grin smeared across his rotund face. "I only just got this. I haven't had the chance to play with it yet."

Alice was rendered speechless. How on earth did Christopher manage to get his hands on a restricted weapon like that? It was obvious that he had means and influence, but surely there were limits to what money could buy. The police guarded the OBL-IV guns the way the French guarded the masterpieces at the Louvre. They were all but impossible for civilians to gain access to.

"Of course, you two don't have anything to worry about, do you?" Christopher said. "I can't fire an OBL-IV. This is useless to everyone, bar the one person whose palm print has been calibrated to it. Right?"

Christopher then flicked a switch. He wrapped the sweaty palm of his right hand around the gun's biometric grip.

The weapon emitted a soft humming noise, then lit up neon green. A ping indicated that it was ready for use.

Christopher beamed. He was exceptionally proud of himself.

Alice and Bourke simultaneously envisioned their own funerals.

"Let me tell you something," Christopher said. "There's nothing in this world you can't buy with a little power and influence. You supply a hacker or the chief of police with enough money and enough drugs, and they'll do whatever it is you ask of them."

This was all too much for Bourke to handle. He'd seen enough. It was time to escape this vision of hell.

He sprang from the floor and made a perilous, half-blind dash for the door.

The zombies in the room prepared to pounce the instant their boss gave the order. But Christopher said nothing. He simply smiled and watched as Bourke made his desperate bid for freedom.

"Let him go," he told his zombies.

Bourke sprinted faster than he ever thought possible. He made it to within two feet of the exit.

Christopher calmly raised the OBL-IV and fired.

A rope of electrical current was shot out from the gun and struck Bourke's spinal column, just below his ribcage.

The burst of concentrated energy expanded and tore Bourke's body open from the inside out. He was ripped apart into five large chunks of human flesh.

Alice fell back to the floor, dumbfounded. The power emitted from this one device, roughly the size of a paperback novel, was mind-boggling.

"I know, it's a bit messy, isn't it?" Christopher said with an apologetic shrug. "But it's effective. And it's fun. I'm not going to lie about that."

Christopher reached for the mask behind his desk. He sucked in another deep lungful of nitrous oxide. He was having too much fun, and he needed a moment to come down from the excitement.

He tossed the mask aside, then picked up the gun and turned to Alice.

"You should take solace in the fact that it was all over very quickly for him, which was much more than he deserved. Of the many ways I could have chosen to kill you both, this is the most humane."

Christopher pressed a button on the OBL-IV. The soft humming noise resumed.

“Three down, two more to go.”

He pointed the gun at Alice. The digital crosshairs locked in on her head.

“Once you and Morgan are out of the way, the money will be all mine.”

The gun made a ping sound to indicate that it had powered up and was ready to be fired again.

Christopher moved his finger over the trigger.

Alice squeezed her eyes closed. This was it for her.

And then something happened.

A warm kind of peace descended upon her. Her moment of death had arrived – and she was okay with it.

There were certainly worse ways to go. She probably wouldn't even feel anything. The gun would discharge, and a microsecond later she would cease to exist.

She hadn't realized she was doing it, but a faint smile had appeared on her face.

But before Christopher could finish her off, a high-pitched noise sounded from the other side of the room.

BEEP ... BEEP ... BEEP ...

Christopher paused. He lowered the weapon.

He looked across, searching for the source of the interruption. “What is that?” he said.

Alice opened her eyes.

The beeping grew louder and faster.

Christopher's eyes scoured the room. They landed on one of the zombies in the corner.

It was Needlemouse – or the young woman who had earlier posed as Needlemouse. She scratched furiously at her neck.

“Whatever that noise is, could you please shut it off?” Christopher snapped.

Needlemouse suddenly doubled over in pain. She let out an excruciating, nails-down-the-blackboard howl that sent a shiver rippling through Alice's body.

She was in a state of pure agony, but no sympathy was forthcoming from Christopher. This unscheduled disturbance had angered him greatly.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” he shouted at her.

Needlemouse collapsed to the floor. Her moans grew louder and more harrowing.

The beeping rose again in volume. The frequency increased.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Christopher leaped from one side of the room to the other, something he achieved in only three steps. His

robotic legs allowed him to bound vast distances like a galloping gazelle.

He grabbed Needlemouse by the scruff of the neck and yanked her to her feet.

“Pull yourself together, woman! What in god’s name has gotten into you?”

Needlemouse didn’t respond. She screamed and clawed away at her neck, her dirty fingernails digging deep into her yellow skin. Christopher slapped her hands away to see what she was scratching at.

That was when he discovered the source of her pain: a small matchbox-sized implant, inserted just beneath her skin.

It flashed bright red.

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

Christopher realized, too late, just what was happening here.

Needlemouse’s number had come up.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP

The device activated, and Needlemouse exploded.

The blast rocked the entire room, the sudden force throwing everyone to the floor.

A short time later, the thirteen members of the Consortium were informed that Danielle Coxon – aka contestant number two hundred and thirty-one – had been the latest unlucky player in their monthly Russian roulette competition.

Mae Foster-Morris, the Swiss banking executive and world’s fourth-richest person, was the only member to have selected this contestant for the round. For this, she was awarded a prize of \$196 million.

Chapter 31

The smoke slowly cleared from the room. With a great deal of effort, Alice forced herself to sit upright.

She didn't know how long she'd been out for when she finally came to. It couldn't have been long; half a minute, maybe.

Her body ached more than ever after she landed hard on her back. A high-pitch whine rang in both ears, and her head throbbed with severe spasms of pain. She struggled to hold on to consciousness. It felt like she'd been hit by a car.

Christopher was also on the floor, lying on his back like a turtle stuck on its shell. His arms flayed about and his robot legs twitched in mid-air, as he vainly tried to push himself back up. It took several attempts before he finally managed to roll onto his side.

Alice inhaled a sharp intake of breath upon witnessing the horror before her.

A large gap now existed where Christopher's right arm used to be.

The explosion had blown Christopher's arm clean off. All that remained were pieces of bone, ligament and loose skin hanging from the shoulder socket.

But if Christopher was upset about the loss of another limb, it didn't show.

"Well how about that," he said, a slight inebriated wooziness coming into his voice. "I was debating whether or not to get mechanical arms to replace the ones my creator burdened me with."

Despite experiencing what must have been excruciating pain, Christopher seemed delighted at the prospect of becoming more robotic. He was positively beaming.

"I guess the decision has been made for me."

He slowly dragged himself across the floor, inching his way towards the giant pill-filled display case in the center of the room. A trail of blood streaked the floor behind him.

With his one remaining hand, he pressed on the remote control around his neck over and over. Hundreds of little yellow pills were deposited into the receptacle, before it overflowed and they spilled out onto the floor.

He scooped up a handful and shoved them into his mouth like a child left alone in a candy store.

Christopher maintained a strict rule about not getting high on his own supply, but these were extraordinary circumstances. He needed something to dull the pain and prevent his body from going into shock, and he

needed it now.

Dozens of surplus lemon drops rolled across the floor. Most of the zombies were still dazed by the explosion. The few who remained conscious fought among themselves for the leftover drugs.

Christopher laid on his back for a moment and stared up at the ceiling. All this activity, not to mention the significant blood loss, had drained the energy right out of him.

“Those limbs aren’t cheap, though,” he said, his breathing even more labored than usual. “So I’m gonna need to get my hand on that hundred million as soon as possible.”

He lifted his head and looked across the room. His eyes locked with Alice’s.

The fear pummeled into her like a wounded bull. She knew exactly what was coming.

“I want the girl dead!” Christopher shouted to his zombie army. “Five hundred lemon drops to the one who brings me her head!”

Alice scrambled to her feet. She’d heard of zombies beating people half to death for their loose change. What they’d be willing to do for five hundred pills didn’t bear thinking about.

She looked desperately for a way out – a fire escape, an air vent, anything. But she was cornered. There was only the one exit, and more than two dozen zombies stood between her and it. At present, most of the zombies were either scrambling over the excess pills on the floor, or were temporarily deafened and stunned from the blast. But they wouldn’t stay that way for much longer.

They would be coming for her.

Alice spied the OBL-IV lying on the floor a few feet away and made a desperate lunge for it.

Christopher saw this and let out a caustic laugh.

“I’m afraid that won’t be much use to you, honey,” he taunted.

She pointed the gun at Christopher and pulled the trigger, hoping for a miracle.

Nothing happened, as she expected. The OBL-IV was assigned to Christopher, and it wouldn’t work without his palm print. In her hands it was nothing more than a useless lump of plastic and fiberglass.

But in Christopher’s hands ...

She looked to the corner of the room.

The pile of bones and internal organs and body parts.

The majority of it was the remains of the recently departed Needlemouse, who was now spread across the floor, walls and ceiling like a human Jackson Pollock artwork.

But sticking out among all of that was part of a large forearm and a meaty hand.

She swooped in on the hand. It definitely belonged to Christopher. It was the size of a baseball mitt. The fingers were fat and sausage-like.

But only three of those fingers were still attached to the hand.

She placed the palm over the gun's handle. She pressed down and hoped for the best.

Nothing.

She still only had sixty percent of a hand. For the gun to work, she would require the full quota of digits.

She looked over to the zombies. A few more were up on their feet now. Time was against her. The pills would soon be gobbled up, and the zombies would be on the hunt for more.

She dived into the pile of remains and sifted through for any unattached fingers. She found lumps of skin and flesh and bone that vaguely *resembled* fingers, but she was unable to verify exactly what they were.

She played a frantic game of mix and match with the various body parts, trying to fit the right pieces of anatomy into the right slots, like she was assembling an Ikea Frankenstein.

She located what looked like Christopher's detached thumb and slotted it into the correct position.

If she stopped for a moment to think about how revolting this whole process was, she would never have been able to go through with it. But time to think was a luxury she simply did not have. A murderous glint had appeared in the eyes of the zombies. They would be coming for her any moment now.

Her hand landed on something hard. Something metallic. She picked it up and wiped the blood away.

It was a skull ring – the one she had last seen around Christopher's little finger.

She pressed the finger that was attached to the skull ring into the gun's hand grip. The OBL-IV hummed, then lit up neon green.

Just as the zombies were beginning to close in.

Alice thrust the OBL-IV, with Christopher's severed hand wrapped around it, out in front of her. The encroaching zombies stopped in their tracks.

"What are you waiting for?" Christopher barked angrily at his charges. "There's thirty of you and only one of her! She can't shoot you all!"

The dreadlocked zombie took a couple of bold steps toward Alice. She swung the OBL-IV around, and the digital crosshairs locked in on the target. He quickly retreated.

A game of chicken played out between Alice and the zombies. They all knew Alice could only get off one shot; the OBL-IV would take about thirty seconds to recharge before it was ready to be fired again. But no one wanted to be the one to get shot. They all saw what had happened to Bourke only a few minutes ago.

“One thousand pills!” Christopher shouted impatiently. “One thousand pills to whoever kills the bitch! Five hundred for anyone that helps!”

Sweat dripped from Alice’s face like a wet sponge. Her hands quaked. She knew from personal experience there was little a xombie wouldn’t risk for such a huge volume of drugs.

“Do it!” Christopher screamed. “Do it now!”

Alice’s mind performed mental gymnastics as she tried to figure a way out of this. There *had* to be a way, she told herself.

But she only had one shot, and she had to make it count.

She could turn the gun on Christopher. But that would do nothing to ward off the xombies. It would probably enrage them even more, given that she’d killed the person who supplied them with the one thing they loved above all else.

The OBL-IV was powerful. Maybe she could attempt to blast a hole in the wall or in the floor. Try making her escape that way. But where to from there? For all she knew, blowing a hole in the wall would only lead to another dead end.

If all else failed, she could use it on herself. It would be a more preferable way of dying than being torn limb from limb, and at least it would be on her own terms.

And then, from out of nowhere, the most obvious solution of all drifted into her head.

The display case in the center of the room.

The one filled with millions of lemon drops.

Alice swung the gun around. The gun’s digital crosshairs zeroed in on the center of the display case.

She pressed Christopher’s detached finger against the trigger, and the OBL-IV discharged.

The blast obliterated the walls of the case, and the thick glass casing was crystallized into a fine powder. A yellow avalanche descended on the room as the pills spilled out onto the floor.

In an instant, every single xombie forgot all about Alice and dived into the tidal wave of narcotics. They shoved as many as they could into their pockets and mouths, like starving pigeons swooping in on a split bag of grain.

“No!” Christopher screamed. “You need to kill the girl first! Kill her and I’ll make you all millionaires!”

But it was no use. Christopher could only watch on helplessly as his entire drug supply was devoured by thirty ravenous xombies.

Chapter 32

Alice was mute as Morgan drove her back to her place, her hands, face and clothes drenched in blood. She stared straight ahead without uttering a single word. Morgan made one or two gentle attempts at finding out what had happened, but she was in no condition to talk. She could only manage a few words before her emotions got the better of her.

They rode the elevator up to her apartment.

Another brown envelope had been slipped underneath her front door. Morgan quickly scooped it up and hid it from Alice before she could see it. He figured she didn't need to know about Harrison and Melissa's elimination just yet, and what this meant for their own situation.

Alice left Morgan in the lounge and hurried off to clean herself up. She locked the bathroom door behind her, then emptied her pockets.

She took a moment to stare at the hundreds of lemon drops laid out on the counter before her.

When the rush of counterfeit Xylox spilled out from the display case and onto Christopher's floor, Alice disregarded all her instincts for self-preservation and did what any other addict would have done when confronted with a near-infinite supply of free drugs – she lost her mind. She dived head-first into the spillage, along with every other zombie in the room, and scooped up as many as she could manage like a contestant on a game show. It was as if every one of her birthdays and Christmases had come at once.

It was a sign of how warped Alice's priorities had become that she chose to scramble after all the loose lemon drops when the chaos unfolded, but forgot all about the piles of cash Christopher had stacked up on his desk.

Midway through, she paused for a split-second to take in her surroundings and observe just what she was doing. Only then did it occur to her that it might be in her best interests to get out while she had the chance. She was grateful that at least a small part of her sensible old self still remained, and that maybe she hadn't completely transformed into a brainless drug fiend just yet.

She necked five pills before Morgan found her, but these were yet to produce any discernible effect. Xylox usually took thirty to forty minutes to kick in after swallowing, which equated to about six weeks in relative zombie time.

She crushed three pills into a fine powder. She knew that ingesting eight lemon drops within the space of an hour was pushing the envelope, but her tolerance level by now was so much higher than that of a regular person. The past few months had seen her develop the constitution of a rhinoceros.

One line went up her nose, along with six months' worth of dust and grime from her dirty bathroom sink.

A minute later, Alice's tense muscles finally began to relax. Her brain expressed its gratitude by unleashing a flood of serotonin on her nervous system. The chronic thump at the back of her head faded to a gentle pulse.

She snorted the second line, and her pain and melancholic disposition melted further away. She sat down on the linoleum floor and closed her eyes. Peace was finally upon her. It felt like her bones were dissolving inside her body.

Morgan paced back and forth in Alice's lounge room. This day was just getting crazier and crazier. He still wasn't entirely sure what had happened tonight, or who was behind it all. Every answer he received only threw up further questions.

He had expected the worst when he wasn't able to find Alice. He had tried calling her APhID to warn her about Bourke, but she wasn't answering. He hurried around to her place and knocked on her door, but received the same response. There was no sign of forced entry, so that gave him hope.

He jumped in his car and drove around the city to look for her. He didn't know where to start, but he felt he had to do something.

Two hours into his search, he received a frantic call from Alice. She was alive, but in a highly distressed and agitated state.

He found her twenty minutes later. She was huddled out the front of a gas station, covered in blood and god knows what else. She looked like someone who had just escaped from a slaughterhouse.

Morgan glanced at his watch. Alice had been in the bathroom for over half an hour now. He thought about checking in on her, but hesitated. He didn't want to come across as overbearing. He'd give her another ten or fifteen minutes before making sure she was alright.

He sunk into the couch and closed his eyes. Something about this didn't seem right. Something big had happened, but Alice wasn't letting on. He prodded her for details on the way over, but he was unable to coax a word out of her. He figured she'd tell him in her own time. Maybe her trauma was too overwhelming for her to talk about it just yet.

Or maybe she had something to hide.

Morgan opened his eyes. A second brown envelope had materialized, over on the floor near the front door.

Further messages of death.

He sprung up off the couch and hurried across. He tore the envelope open and pulled out the card.

He saw Bourke Nation's face with the word "ELIMINATED" stamped across it, and a tremendous feeling of relief washed over him.

Bourke had finally been eliminated. He was dead. After five months of obsessively tracking his every move, waiting for him to slip up so he could catch him in the act, he was no more. The biggest problem in Morgan's life at that point in time had just been solved.

The whole time Morgan had been following him, in the back of his mind he assumed that Bourke would still find some way to win. Because that's just the way it goes – guys like Bourke always won in the end.

But not this time. The world was changing, and the likes of Bourke were slipping further down the food chain.

Morgan was struck by a wave of emotion that he wasn't quite prepared for. He knew this was a significant moment in his life. It was a moment that would live on in his memory for a long, long time.

But his elation was short-lived when he noticed the envelope contained a second card. There had been another fatality. Two deaths at the same time. Four in the one day.

And thanks to a process of elimination, he didn't need to see the photograph to know who it belonged to.

But he felt compelled to pull it out anyway, just to confirm that Christopher Gibson was also out of the lottery.

Morgan's stomach contracted as the news hit. He went weak at the knees. A sensation akin to vertigo. A lump the size of his fist formed in his throat.

What was going on here? Alice was covered in blood when he found her, and now two more contestants have shown up dead – in addition to Harrison Ester and Melissa Siebel from earlier.

Maybe there was a reasonable explanation behind all of this. He was fairly certain that Alice wasn't a killer. But he couldn't be one hundred percent certain. Money could do strange things to normal people. It could do even stranger things to strange people.

His mind gyrated in circles. Should he stay? Leave? The shower was still running. Maybe he should get out of there while he still had the chance.

He was halfway out the door when a sudden realization stopped him in his tracks.

There were six contestants remaining in the lottery at the beginning of the day.

Four had been eliminated in the past fifteen hours.

Now, there were only two left.

CHRISTOPHER GIBSON (2025-2067) Pronounced dead at 11:07 p.m. on 5 October. Massive blood loss was recorded as the official cause of death.

Approximately forty minutes earlier, an ambulance had been called after a morbidly obese man fitted with two robotic legs was found unconscious by the side of a busy road. Onlookers said the man appeared to have lost an arm in an accident, and had collapsed on the sidewalk after attempting to walk to the nearest hospital.

The man was still alive when paramedics arrived on the scene a short time later. They believed he may have survived, were it not for the fact that he was too heavy to fit into the regular-sized ambulance. A supersized bariatric ambulance arrived seventeen minutes later, but by then precious time had been lost.

The Remaining Contestants

MORGAN COMPSTON (2036-)

ALICE KATO (2040-)

PAYOUT FOR CRAFT DEATH

The Daily Ink

5 October, 2067

Surveillance company ASE Industries has agreed to a twenty million dollar out of court settlement after a woman was killed by one of its crafts.

Naomi Duke, 34, died in September last year after being struck on the head by a dislodged component from a faulty surveillance craft operated by ASE Industries.

Following a lengthy legal dispute, in which ASE counter-sued the family of Ms. Duke for what they described as “a malicious and defamatory smear campaign”, ASE finally admitted responsibility and agreed to the terms of the payout.

The company also faced heavy criticism following revelations they had deleted potentially incriminating footage from the defective craft shortly after the incident had occurred.

“We wish to extend our deepest sympathies to Ms. Duke and her family, and apologize for the trauma they may have suffered,” ASE CEO Nelson Hyslop said in a statement yesterday. “ASE is committed to upholding world-class safety standards in the assembling and operation of its surveillance crafts. Our existing procedures are scheduled to undergo a thorough review to ensure a tragedy like this never occurs again.”

A lawyer for Ms. Duke said the family welcomed the settlement and were pleased to finally have the matter resolved, but made no further comment.

Legal experts have speculated that ASE may still face obstruction of justice charges in relation to the tampering of evidence.

[Subscribe now to view the full story]

Chapter 33

Alice felt a lot better once she'd washed away the blood and viscera and thrown on some clean clothes. But she didn't look all that refreshed when she finally emerged from the bathroom. Dark rings encircled her eyes, and her face was again coated in a thin perspiration sheen. It was as if the Xylox was trying to escape her body via her pores.

She hoped it wasn't too obvious what she was doing in there, although she assumed by now Morgan had caught on to the fact that she was a borderline xombie. She had become pretty skilled at hiding her addiction from the people around her, but after a while it became kind of apparent. Denial and heavy makeup only went so far.

At least she could allow herself to relax now. Bourke Nation, the contestant she was most afraid of, had been eliminated from the lottery. Christopher Gibson, the contestant she *should* have been most afraid of, was also out of the picture. Her hope was that, at long last, she could live her life without having to worry about people trying to kill her.

And on that thought, the barrel of a gun pressed up against the back of her head.

Alice felt her blood turn to ice. Her tiny lounge room suddenly felt as expansive as an empty cathedral.

"Morgan?" she said.

In the back of her mind she hoped this was some kind of joke.

"What ... what are you doing?"

"Spare me the innocent act," Morgan replied. His voice was different. Angrier, harsher. Loaded with venom. "You know exactly what's going on here."

"What are you talking—"

"You and I are both thinking the same thing. I'm just getting in first."

She heard a click, as the gun's hammer cocked back.

It didn't take long for Alice to visualize the sequence of events in her head.

The envelope announcing Bourke and Christopher's elimination must have been delivered while she was cleaning herself up – in addition to Harrison's and Melissa's from earlier in the day. Morgan would have realized that he and Alice were the only two contestants remaining in the lottery.

He would have deduced that four people had been eliminated in the one day – at the same time that Alice was literally washing blood from her hands.

He allowed his imagination to fill in the blanks.

Alice had to concede that this all looked a bit suspicious. She couldn't blame Morgan for thinking what he was probably thinking.

"It's not what it looks like," was the best she could offer.

"Oh yeah? So what does it look like?"

"Well ... " Alice wasn't quite sure how to answer that. She figured the honest truth was better than trying to concoct a plausible cover story on the fly. "It might look like I killed four people today."

She paused, before adding, "And that I brought you here to kill you, too."

"And that's *not* your intention?"

Morgan pushed the gun harder into the back of Alice's skull.

"No, I swear—"

"You're telling me you didn't kill any of them?"

"No! Christopher shot Bourke first, and then he lost his arm when—"

"Ha! You expect me to believe that legless tub of lard is capable of killing anyone?"

Alice was relieved that Morgan had cut her off when he did. Had he allowed her to complete the remainder of that sentence – the part about Christopher's secret identity, his robotic legs, the exploding xombie, the detached arm, and the OBL-IV – her story would have come across as even more absurd than it already was.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but you have to believe me."

Morgan shook his head. "To be honest, it doesn't really matter whether you're telling the truth or not. That's all in the past. The only thing that matters now is that you and I are the only two left."

Alice knew exactly what was running through Morgan's mind at that moment.

Deep down, Morgan knew Alice wasn't a killer. She could barely keep herself alive, let alone wipe out four people in the one day. He only wanted to believe she might be to justify what he was about to do next.

In the short time he'd had to think about it, Morgan had succumbed to wild fantasies of what one hundred million dollars could do for him.

All that money. How it would change his life. The incredibly decadent lifestyle he would have access to. He could do anything he wanted. He could be anyone he wanted.

The idea had burrowed itself deep inside Morgan's psyche like an aggressive parasite. As with the most stubborn parasites, once it was in there it was impossible to remove. And as with the most insidious of parasites, it had begun to modify the host.

Morgan knew he didn't have the capacity to murder twenty-six people for a hundred million dollars. But just *one* person? That was a different story. That was as simple as pointing a gun and pulling the trigger.

In the past year, Morgan had discarded his former self and constructed an entirely new persona from the ground up. It was something like a metamorphosis, or an animal shedding its skin. He didn't really know or understand what was happening at the time, or what it all meant. But now everything made sense. It had all been leading up to this one moment.

He had risen to the challenge, and this was his reward.

One second of cold-blooded insanity, and everything he could ever dream of would be his.

"Morgan, please," Alice begged, her voice wavering. "You really don't want to do this."

Alice was right. Morgan didn't want to do this. He liked Alice. A lot. Despite her faults – and she had plenty – he had grown to like her immensely in these past few weeks.

But he liked the thought of limitless wealth and unfettered opulence even more.

Everyone has their price.

The feelings he had for Alice would eventually fade. Time heals all wounds. Time plus money heals them a hell of a lot faster.

Morgan steeled himself with a deep breath. It was time to collect.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

He squeezed the trigger.

The blast was heard from three blocks away.

Chapter 34

The crime scene photographers snapped their shots, making sure they captured the body from every conceivable angle.

A dozen forensics had converged on the scene, diligently dusting for prints and cataloging evidence. There were more people present than there really needed to be, but that was understandable given the victim had died via a single bullet wound to the head. Offenses involving firearms were treated with the utmost importance. There was also the novelty factor; because this type of death was such a rarity, occurring maybe once every two or three years, they all wanted to see firsthand what one looked like.

“Haven’t we been in this apartment before?” one of the forensics asked a colleague.

This enquiry was met with a non-committal shrug.

“This place looks familiar. I think we were here about a year ago.”

One of the photographers blanched when she zoomed in on the entry wound. The surrounding carpet was soaked a dark shade of crimson. Grain-sized fragments of skull and brain were sprinkled across the walls and furniture. It was hard to believe a single head contained so much matter.

The forensic crouched down next to the victim and shook his head.

“Those stains are gonna be tough to get out,” he said to the photographer. “I don’t envy the clean-up crew for this one.”

The photographer lowered her camera. “Any witnesses?”

“I think they have someone down at the station as we speak,” he replied.

Officer Schultz knocked on the door to the interview room.

Detective Olszewski was irritated by the abrupt interruption, but experienced a quick change of heart once she saw the rookie cop holding a fresh cup of coffee for her. She eagerly waved him in.

“Now,” Olszewski said after enjoying her first sip. “Let’s go over what happened one more time.”

Alice slumped down in her chair and folded her arms. “I’m not saying another word without a lawyer present,” she said.

“Very funny,” Olszewski replied, her lips forming a thin smile.

Alice yawned and rubbed her eyes. “How many more times are we going to keep doing this? I’ve already told you everything I know.”

“I’m aware of that. I just want to hear it again. In your own words. To make sure I haven’t missed anything.”

And so Alice told Detective Olszewski, once more, the sequence of the night’s events as they unfolded from beginning to end.

She told her how the meeting with her source in the car park turned into a terrifying kidnapping ordeal, where she was thrown into the trunk of a car and taken to the headquarters of the now-late crime figure known as Goliath.

She told her about the bloodshed that had erupted there, and how by the grace of god she somehow managed to escape.

She described how her friend Morgan found her in the street and drove her back to her place, and how they went up to her apartment together.

And how he produced an improvised firearm, which he then attempted to use on her.

“All I remember is feeling the gun pressed against the back of my head, then a loud bang. I turned around and saw Morgan on the floor with a hole between his eyes.”

Olszewski scribbled a few more notes, but she kept her eyes focused on Alice the whole time. This produced a somewhat unsettling effect. Alice wondered if this technique was something she practiced in her spare time in the hope of intimidating nervous suspects.

“I guess the gun was faulty,” Alice continued. “Lucky for me, otherwise I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Detective Olszewski stopped writing, but her gaze remained firmly on Alice. By this point of the night she honestly didn’t know what to think. Alice’s story seemed a little too perfect. She was ready to pounce on the slightest inconsistency in her version of events.

But everything so far had checked out. Morgan was found on the floor of Alice’s living room with a shaved-down bolt lodged deep in his skull. His hand was still wrapped around the gun. Preliminary forensics confirmed that he had been the one to fire the weapon.

And if that wasn’t sufficient enough evidence, Alice had a number of miniature cameras positioned throughout her apartment. The footage obtained from these showed the exact scenario Alice had described – Morgan firing the defective weapon, and the bullet flying out of the chamber backwards.

“Were you aware the deceased owned an illegal firearm?” Detective Olszewski asked.

Alice shook her head. “I had no idea.”

“Do you know where he might have obtained one from?”

“No, I’ve never seen a gun in real life before. I didn’t even know it was possible to get one.”

“Ordinarily, you can’t. But you know how it is – where there’s a will, there’s a way.” Olszewski tossed her pen down on the desk. “Despite our best efforts, some people still manage to get their hands on a gun, one way or another.”

A moment of silence passed as she shuffled some papers around on her desk, then looked back at Alice.

“I think we’re about done for tonight,” she said. “We’ll be in touch if we need to speak with you any further.”

Alice nodded, then slowly rose from her seat.

Olszewski held the door open for her as she left. “Do you have somewhere you can stay tonight?”

“I’ll give my brother a call. I’ll probably stay with him for a while.”

Alice wasn’t sure what prompted her to say this. It had been more than a year since she had last seen Lachlan, and she didn’t have the slightest clue where he was. She just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

She stuffed her hands in her pockets and hurried out the door.

“Hey Alice.”

Alice stopped and turned back. “Yes?”

A hint of a smile formed on Detective Olszewski’s face. “Well played.”

GUN CREEP GETS 33 YEARS

The Daily Ink

6 October, 2067

A convicted sex offender was yesterday sentenced to thirty-three years' jail after being found guilty of the production and distribution of hundreds of illegal firearms.

Police raided the Carling Crescent home of Joel Ozterhauzezen in March after he was arrested for indecently exposing himself to a group of preteen girls outside a concert by pop group Level 1.

During the search they uncovered a cache of homemade weapons, along with equipment, parts, hundreds of homemade bullets, and blueprints for constructing the weapons. They also seized over \$300,000 in cash.

Police estimate that Ozterhauzezen had assembled and sold approximately four hundred improvised firearms over the past ten years.

“Mr. Ozterhauzezen is a danger to society, and we are pleased that he will be off the streets for many years to come,” Detective Charlotte Olszewski said after the sentencing. “We believe he was responsible for a significant proportion of the illegal weapons on our streets; weapons that in many instances were as dangerous to the user as they were to the intended victim.”

In sentencing Ozterhauzezen, Judge Jillian Doherty took into account his lack of remorse, his not guilty plea, and a prior conviction for lewd behavior during a children's beauty pageant.

He will be eligible for parole in 2092.

[Subscribe now to view the full story]

Alice was an unmitigated wreck when she left the police station. The lottery may have officially concluded, but her nightmare was far from over.

The enormity of what had happened seemed to hit her all at once, plowing into her like a speeding locomotive. She realized how close she had come to death, and how she had been saved by nothing more than dumb luck.

It was the middle of the night. Daybreak was still several hours away.

Her body shivered as she made her way down the neon-drenched street, compulsively checking over her shoulder every thirty seconds. She half-expected someone to emerge from the shadows to bash her over the head with a crowbar.

She told herself over and over that the threat had passed and she no longer had anything to fear. But her subconscious mind remained unconvinced. She had been on twenty-four/seven high alert for so long that it had become like a default setting. Her adrenaline levels were off the charts. Her entire body vibrated with paranoid anxiety.

She knew of only one thing that could take the edge off: Xylox, and copious amounts of it.

She raided her pockets for cash and found less than twelve dollars in change. Barely enough for three lousy pills.

Desperation was rapidly setting in. The fumes in her system were fast becoming a distant memory.

Three hours earlier, she had enough pills in her possession to last more than six months. That was until Morgan went and got himself shot, and she had to flush the lot before the cops arrived.

She scoured the area for an ATM. Her plan was to withdraw every last cent from her account and buy up as much counterfeit Xylox as she could get her hands on. Goliath was gone now, which meant a major pill shortage was imminent. She wanted to stockpile as many lemon drops as she could before the streets ran dry.

She found an ATM inside a nearby convenience store. She flirted with the idea of buying food, since it had been about two days since she'd last remembered to eat. But she decided to check how much money she had first. She had to get her priorities in order, and her body's craving for Xylox far outweighed its necessity for food.

She swiped her card and pressed her palm against the biometric scanner.

She selected account balance.

She waited for her request to be processed. Payday was yesterday, but there could sometimes be delays

with her wages going through.

The clerk behind the counter eyed her like a hawk. Alice didn't blame him for being suspicious. A xombie inside his store in the early hours of the morning usually spelled trouble.

A moment later, her updated balance displayed on the ATM screen.

It read \$104,676,415.32.

Later that day, Dominic Massa's net worth increased by a further \$770 million. This was due to the fact that he was the only member of the Consortium to correctly pick Alice Kato as the winner of the lottery.

While the money was a nice bonus, it was a mere drop in the ocean for the real estate tycoon with a personal fortune of over \$600 billion.

As with all the other contests the Consortium ran, the money was a secondary concern. The biggest prize was the bragging rights.

Officer Schultz saw the light on inside Detective Olszewski's office when he arrived for work the following morning. He tapped lightly on the door.

"Have you been here all night?" he said.

Detective Olszewki waved him away. Her focus remained on her screens as she scrutinized every frame of the security footage from Alice Kato's apartment. Hidden cameras covered almost every angle, and they showed what happened exactly as Alice had described it.

"I don't know about this, Schultz," Olszewski said, shaking her head. "Something about this just doesn't feel right. Everything seems a little bit ..." She paused as she tried to summon the appropriate adjective. "*Off.*"

Schultz looked at the footage over her shoulder. "How do you mean?"

"Don't you think her story was a bit too neat?"

The rookie cop shrugged his shoulders. "Very little about what I've seen over these past few months has made a whole lot of sense to me. Why, what are you thinking?"

"I was just thinking ..." Olszewski hesitated for a moment. "What if the gun belonged to Alice Kato?"

Schultz leaned in closer to examine the footage. "Do we have any proof to support this?"

"No, it's just an idea I'm putting out there. Here, look ..."

She brought up the feeds for each camera.

“She had eleven cameras set up in her apartment, but we never see where Morgan Compston pulls the gun from. One minute he doesn’t have it, the next he does.”

Olszewski leaned back in her chair. She was doing her best to rearrange the myriad of thoughts and information swirling through her sleep-deprived brain into one cohesive theory.

“What if this was some kind of test?” she said. “What if Alice left the gun out for Morgan to find, knowing that it would backfire on him? That way he gets eliminated from the contest, but he’s the one responsible for his own death. She doesn’t harbor any guilt because he tried to kill her first. He pulled the trigger on himself.”

Schultz lifted his eyebrows in admiration for his boss’s astuteness. “Do you really think she’s that clever?”

“I’m not sure,” Olszewski said with a resigned shrug. “I think she may have been a touch brighter than we gave her credit for.”

Despite her decade of experience, Olszewski never quite managed to get a good read of Alice Kato. Even now, she was still none the wiser as to whether Alice was a complete innocent caught in a wretched situation, or a skilled liar manipulating everyone around her.

“Have forensics run their tests yet?”

Olszewski pulled up the report on her screen. “Her fingerprints weren’t on the gun. Only his were.”

Schultz ran his eyes over the report. “It says here that her DNA was found on the weapon.”

“So?”

“So that means it could be hers.”

“The gun was in her apartment, Schultz. She came into contact with it. Of course her DNA is going to be on the weapon.”

Olszewski knew it was futile pursuing the matter any further, and that she was only doing this to satisfy her own curiosity. Even if she was able to build a solid case against Alice Kato, nothing would ever come of it. Alice was now unimaginably wealthy, and there was little point in pursuing someone in a court of law when that person could afford a battalion of lawyers.

She blew out a lungful of air. The past year-and-a-bit had been a trying time for her, both professionally and personally. Turning up for work every day, not knowing what kind of senseless war crime was awaiting her, combined with the fact that there was nothing any of them could do to put a stop to it. It took its toll after a while.

She was glad this whole contest was finally over. Until the next one, in about three years’ time.

“Do you want to know what I think?” Schultz said.

Olszewski spun her chair around. “Lay it on me.”

“It is of my professional opinion that you’ve done enough police work for one day.”

This managed to arouse a smile from the detective.

“And I think you’ve devoted enough time to this case already. Go home. Someone else can take over from here.”

“Don’t worry,” she sighed. “I don’t plan on spending any more time here than I absolutely have to.”

Schultz left the office a short time later, and Detective Olszewski packed away her belongings. But there was one more thing she needed to do. It was her most important task for the week.

She called her husband to tell him the good news: the lottery had come to an end, and she would finally get her life back.

She also told him that the criminal known as Goliath was believed to be dead.

She then instructed him to book their holiday to the Maldives for the earliest date possible.

And even though she knew this pushed the boundaries of professionalism, she celebrated by emptying the remainder of her bottle of vodka into her morning coffee.

Chapter 35

Alice was half asleep, dozing in front of the TV, when the sound of her front door opening jolted her wide awake.

Her eyes snapped open. She held her breath and listened. She heard nothing but silence.

She tiptoed out of her bedroom and peeked around the corner. She couldn't see anyone, but it was too dark to know for sure.

She took another step. She ran her hand over the wall until it fell across the light switch.

"Hello, Alice," a voice said, just as the lights flickered on. "Didn't wake you, did I?"

She spun around.

The shock of the moment assaulted her. Impossible. This could not be happening.

Christopher Gibson.

He was alive. He was inside her apartment. And he was massive.

He towered over her, now almost eight feet tall.

He had finally lived up to the Goliath name.

Since their last encounter, Christopher had undergone a number of significant cosmetic alterations. He had a robotic right arm plugged into his shoulder socket in place of the one he lost in the explosion. He'd also voluntarily had the left one removed and replaced, just to balance it out. His body now boasted the complete set of four android limbs.

A clutch of wires spilled from the computerized implant at the back of his head, snaking down and connecting to the sphere of silicon circuitry and blinking LED lights lodged in his chest cavity. A titanium exoskeleton provided the impenetrable exterior to his electronic interior.

His body now contained more metal and plastic than flesh and bone. He was officially more machine than man.

Alice stared at the monstrosity before her, this irresponsible collision of science and nature. She tried speaking, but her words evaporated into nothingness the moment they passed her lips, so Christopher spoke for her.

"I know, I know, I'm supposed to be dead," he said. "Technically, I think maybe I still am. But they've

made some tremendous advances in the field of anatomical emulation technology. As long as you have the money, there isn't much they won't do for you."

Alice acted on instinct. She made a move to run for the door, but Christopher's CPU-powered brain was much too fast for her. His robotic right arm shot out, extending to double its length. Alice felt a mechanical claw clamp around her neck.

"I guess this means the lottery is still in progress, doesn't it?" Christopher said. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to reclaim my prize money."

The pressure on Alice's throat was air-tight. She gasped desperately for breath, but to no avail. Her feet left the ground and kicked in mid-air.

There was a sickening crunch when Christopher's vise-like grip crushed her windpipe and vertebrae like a Styrofoam cup.

The last thing she saw was Christopher's gap-toothed smile, as the world around her faded away to nothingness.

The contest may have wrapped months ago, but Alice's mental state continued to deteriorate. She assumed that once it was all over her trauma would come to an end. Little did she know, it was just the beginning.

Flashbacks and delusions were an everyday ordeal. Hallucinations were indistinguishable from reality. Panic attacks were triggered by the most innocuous events.

She flinched at every shadow, refused to answer the door or her APhID, and believed that everyone she encountered was out to get her.

Plagued by survivor's guilt, sleep eluded her for days on end. When it did come, it was only in fits and starts.

Even her prolific Xylox use did nothing to help her. Despite its reputation as a panacea, there were some ailments that even Xylox was unable to alleviate.

This fact did nothing to curb Alice's rampant pill-popping, though. Unlimited funds allowed her to lock herself away from the world and anesthetize herself all day, every day. And so that was exactly what she did. Days blurred into weeks, then into months.

She had moved out of her old place and into a luxury new penthouse apartment suite in an upmarket district of the city. It was fitted out with security cameras, hi-tech alarms, a panic room, and round-the-clock

guards – all of which did nothing to make her feel the slightest bit safer. The wounds inflicted by fourteen months of psychological napalm were still raw. Demons had taken up residence inside her head, and they showed no sign of checking out anytime soon.

Friedrich Nietzsche is credited with coining the phrase, “Whatever doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger”.

He later contracted syphilis. This led to migraines and attacks of blindness, then eventually dementia and paralysis.

It may not have killed him, but by no means did it make him stronger.

GOLIATH DEAD!

VICTIMS OF CRIME CELEBRATE AS POLICE CHIEF CONFIRMS DEMISE OF NOTORIOUS URBAN WARLORD

The Daily Ink

18 November, 2067

“Goliath”, the barbaric underworld figure who imposed a one-man reign of terror on city streets for the past six years, is dead.

Police commissioner Maximilian Yu confirmed the infamous murderer, drug lord, pimp, organ trafficker and intellectual copyright infringer was killed last month during an altercation at a disused slaughterhouse, believed to be his base of operations.

“Investigations are ongoing, and we are continuing to piece together the exact set of circumstances regarding what happened that night,” Commissioner Yu informed the media at a press conference today. “We are unable to go into specific details at this stage, other than to say that it appears Goliath was killed during a raid on his hideout, possibly by a rival crime syndicate.”

The demise of Goliath, who was believed to have controlled as much as ninety-eight percent of the counterfeit Xylox market in the city and surrounding districts, and was wanted in connection with over three hundred murders, was welcomed by social services groups and victims of crime advocates.

Police are yet to confirm the identity of the man behind the “Goliath” persona, however The Daily Ink can exclusively reveal that his name was Bourke Alexander Nation, a thirty-nine year old former special needs teacher and peace corps volunteer.

The share price for Elixia Pharmaceuticals, the company that produces Xylox, surged fifty-three percent on the news to close at \$93.66.

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Chapter 36

The cruel irony of the lottery was finally revealed to Alice, a short time after she received her millions.

The instant the money was deposited into her account, Alice was admitted into that most rarefied of groups. She was now one of the mega-wealthy, in the top 0.0001 percent of the population. Just like the Consortium. She had become one of them.

It was the final sting in the tail, and one she did not see coming.

This, she came to realize, was what troubled her the most. She was haunted by everything she had been through over the past year, and the money hung around her neck like a hundred million dead albatrosses. Her newly-acquired affluence may have been her cocoon from the world, but it was also a prison from which she could never escape. She would wake up every morning and see the opulent lifestyle she was living, and memories from her year in hell would come flooding back. It was a constant reminder of the lives lost, and what she had been forced to do to survive.

It was blood money, and she needed to get rid of it.

The Consortium assumed that Alice would do what the winners from the previous three lotteries had done, which was disappear and live out her life in unfettered luxury. That was the last thing she wanted. The only thing she wanted was to move forward with her life and put the past year behind her, but that was impossible when she was surrounded by the spoils of her trauma.

Purging the money would prove to be a lot harder than she had anticipated. She didn't want to just throw it all away. Only by doing something worthwhile would the healing process begin.

She could have offloaded it by giving it all to a charity. But that would only provide a short-term fix for a much larger issue. For any lasting changes to take effect, the problem would need to be attacked at its source.

So she came up with a plan. Something she believed was a much more appropriate use for all her money, and a better way of exorcizing her demons.

Lachlan presented his two forms of valid identification to the burly security guard in the lobby of the Sapphire Blue apartment complex. The guard failed to notice that both were forgeries. He passed through the metal

detector and consented to a rather invasive pat down before being given the all-clear.

Money functions like a moat, he thought to himself as he slipped his shoes back on. It protects the rich from the rabble.

Lachlan didn't think he'd ever get the chance to see his sister again. As recently as a few days ago, he accepted that in all likelihood Alice was dead. He had tried contacting her numerous times, but encountered nothing but dead ends. Her APhID had been disconnected, and she had disappeared from her old apartment months ago.

Filing a missing persons report wasn't an option, given that he was still wanted over his role in the kidnapping. Besides, if she had become another statistic in the lottery there would be nothing anyone could do.

The feelings of guilt and shame weighing down on him were overwhelming. No matter how many times he tried to justify his actions, he couldn't look past the fact that he had abandoned his sister and left her to die. He knew he had no choice in the matter, and that even if he could have stuck around this would have done nothing to affect the lottery's ultimate outcome. It was rational, but it didn't make him feel the slightest bit better.

Just when he thought he was ready to accept that she was gone, he received a call out of the blue.

The shock of hearing Alice's voice was so great that several minutes elapsed before it finally dawned on him what had happened. By some miracle, she had won.

He stepped into the elevator. The doors closed, and less than ten seconds later he had ascended to the eighty-eighth floor.

During their brief twenty-nine second conversation, Alice mentioned that she would need his help with something. She was sketchy with the details, and he would have to meet with her in person to get the full rundown on what she had planned, but she hinted that it involved Discordia regrouping to pull off one final jam.

Lachlan wasn't sure what she had in mind exactly, but Alice's plans were unlikely to ever come to fruition. Discordia was finished now. They had bitten off far more than they could chew, and they were now dealing with the ugly fallout. They had incurred the wrath of some of the world's most powerful people, and in the end nothing was really achieved.

He should have known that nothing ever changes. The rich get richer, and the rest of the world fight for the leftovers.

Lachlan would now spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. Emilia Ulbricht may have publicly declared her support for Discordia and refused to press charges, but this did nothing to affect their status as criminals. They were still wanted by police, who would doubtlessly invent new laws to charge them with, and

all faced lengthy prison time if caught.

The elevator doors opened, and Lachlan saw Alice for the first time in almost two years.

From the moment he laid eyes her, he knew she was in deep trouble. She had shed so much weight that she barely looked human. She was so pale that he thought she might melt into a puddle the second she was exposed to natural light. Her cheeks were sunken and gaunt, like someone had taken a carving knife to her face.

Despite her condition, Lachlan's appearance managed to invoke a faint smile in her.

"You made it," she said.

"Hey, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to see what a luxury penthouse apartment looked like from the inside," he replied.

A moment went by without either one speaking. Lachlan settled into a chair.

Alice reached for one of the many Xylox bottles she had scattered throughout the place. She winced as she extended her arm. Her body was so depleted that even the simplest movements caused discomfort.

She tapped out two pills and forced them down with a mouthful of water.

"So," Lachlan said. "What are these top secret plans you have for me?"

Alice took a deep breath, then leaned forward. The smile on her face grew marginally wider.

"Are you ready for this?" she said.

XOMBIES RUN WILD

The Daily Ink

21 April, 2067

Pharmacists across the city are bracing for the worst as swarms of violent xombies roam the streets on the hunt for drugs.

As many as five pharmacies a day are being held up, with degenerate addicts making off with thousands of dollars worth of medication.

“It’s completely out of control,” remarked one retailer, who asked not to be identified. “We’ve been robbed three times in the past two weeks. These people will do whatever it takes to get their hands on the drugs. They don’t even care what it is, just as long as it gets them high. Half of my staff have quit because they’re unable to deal with the stress.”

Many have taken unprecedented steps to protect themselves and their employees, including hiring round-the-clock security guards. Unconfirmed reports have emerged of others arming themselves with weapons.

This latest shocking crime wave is believed to be the result of the ongoing counterfeit Xylox drought, brought on by the recent death of notorious underworld crime figure Bourke “Goliath” Nation.

Health experts have called on Elixia Pharmaceuticals, the makers of Xylox, to supply addicts with affordable medication and provide further treatment options to assist with their withdrawal and rehabilitation process.

This proposal has been rejected by Elixia Pharmaceuticals, who declined to comment for this article.

The company’s share price rose a further six percent today to reach an all-time high of \$124.55.

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Alice opened her eyes. Her head pounded with sharp spasms of pain. A dull tone rang in both ears. She didn't know how long she'd been out for. It couldn't have been long; half a minute, maybe.

She tried breathing, but inhaled a lungful of the toxic smoke wafting through Goliath's lair.

She was sprawled out on the floor, barely able to move. She felt like she had been hit by a car.

She raised her head and saw that everyone else had been floored by Needlemouse's unscheduled detonation. Dozens of dazed and semiconscious zombies were spread throughout the room. Christopher was on his back, his robotic legs twitching in mid-air.

And then, for one brief moment, something remarkable occurred. Time stood still. All her fear and anger and sadness lifted, and she was touched by a sudden revelation.

She didn't want to die.

More to the point, she didn't want to die here, like this. As a contestant in some warped game, held solely for the amusement of the world's most privileged people.

That was the exact moment Alice chose life over death. If she was going to die, it wouldn't be without a fight. She wasn't about to just sit there and accept her fate. She was going to make those responsible pay for what they had done to her, and to the twenty-six others in the lottery. She vowed to do whatever it took to ensure this kind of thing never happened again.

She made it out of Goliath's lair in one piece, and an hour later was declared victorious in the lottery.

The following six months were spent mapping out her next move. She was confident she could pull it off, but she couldn't do it alone. She would need Lachlan's help to make it happen. And Lachlan would need every contact he had to make her plans become a reality.

But if everything came together, the sweetest revenge of all would be hers.

Chapter 37

It took multiple attempts before Solomon Turner could prize open his heavy eyelids.

He squinted. His eyes turned to water.

He blinked several times in rapid succession until his pupils adjusted to the bright light. He evaluated his surroundings. An unfamiliar all-white room, like an insane asylum. Everything was out of focus, an indefinite blur of hazy shapes and muted sounds.

His mind had regressed to sludge. This was like waking up after a month-long bender. He didn't have the faintest idea of where he was or how he came to be there.

He tried standing, but found he was unable to move. He focused all his energy on lifting his right arm. It refused to budge.

He was paralyzed, numb from the neck down. Trapped like an insect in amber. He wanted to cry out for help, but the words traveled no further than the gag stuffed inside his mouth.

A minute later his vision sharpened, and the fog cleared from his mind.

He looked down to find that he wasn't actually paralyzed. He was strapped into a large chair, like the ones used in courtrooms to restrain violent criminals. His arms and legs were held firmly in place with electronic shackles. He moved his body around and attempted to wriggle free, but to no avail. He wasn't going anywhere.

A silhouette appeared in front of him. The outline of a man of towering height.

This must be the kidnapper.

Solomon was being held for ransom. When you were the world's tenth-richest man, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later.

He knew not to panic. He was prepared for situations like this. Contingency plans had been in place his whole life. His security team would be on their way any moment now. They could track him through his APhID, or via the nanodevices he had implanted in his clothing.

He didn't know who was behind this. He only knew they wouldn't be getting a cent out of him.

He looked up at the man, and a flicker of recognition crossed his face. He knew this person. It was an employee of his.

It was the Messenger.

A flood of relief came over Solomon. His team must have arrived already. He had never been so thrilled to see a member of his staff in all his life. He relaxed, safe in the knowledge that everything would be alright.

So why were there still lingering doubts in the back of his mind?

Something wasn't quite right with this picture. Something to do with the Messenger's demeanor. He made no move to get Solomon out of his predicament. He gave no indication that he was here to help. He just stood there with an impassive look on his face.

A horrendous thought entered Solomon's mind: what if the Messenger wasn't here to rescue him?

What if he was part of this?

That couldn't possibly be true. Not a chance. There was no way something like that could ever happen.

And then, while Solomon was still trying to figure everything out in his head, the Messenger launched straight into his spiel.

"If you are here tonight," the Messenger began, "that means you have been selected to take part in a once in a lifetime opportunity."

For the first time, Solomon noticed he wasn't alone. Twelve more chairs encircled the room in a seashell formation. Each chair held a captive, and each captive was in the process of emerging from their anesthetized slumber.

They were:

Katharine Deckert, mining entrepreneur (estimated net worth of \$340 billion).

Angelo Deluca, casinos & gambling (\$600 billion).

Mae Foster-Morris, banking (\$1.2 trillion).

Jennifer Gibbs, petrochemicals, oil & gas (\$850 billion).

Boyd Hemingway, aviation (\$720 billion).

Teresa Hubicki, energy (\$570 billion).

Nelson Hyslop, ASE Industries (\$280 billion).

Dominic Massa, real estate (\$770 billion).

Lexis Oxley, telecommunications (\$380 billion).

Douglas Pridham, Elixia Pharmaceuticals (\$1.4 trillion).

Ethan Ulbricht, AFX Entertainment (\$560 billion).

Hannah Unger, retail (\$440 billion).

The thirteen captives were all members of the Consortium. Some of the world's wealthiest and most powerful people, all in the one room, and all being held like common prisoners.

"You may be wondering what's going on here," the Messenger continued. "So let me bring you up to speed. At one point, the thirteen of you held a collective wealth amounting to nine trillion dollars. The large majority of that is now gone. My client has seized control of your bank accounts, your holdings, your properties. Anything of value that my client could find. The total value of the assets they were able to recover was somewhere in the vicinity of six trillion dollars. My client has now placed that in a trust."

For a short eternity, Solomon's heart stopped beating.

This had to be a hoax. Some sort of elaborate practical joke the others were playing on him. But judging by the looks on their faces, they were just as stupefied as he was.

"Which brings us to our reason for being here tonight. Each of you will find an invitation in your pocket. On the back of that invitation are two contact numbers. If you call the number on the bottom right, your name will be entered into a type of lottery. The entire prize pool of six trillion dollars will be awarded to the lottery's last surviving member."

This news hit the thirteen members like a sledgehammer to the face.

"For each day the contest runs, one billion dollars will be deducted from the total prize pool and deposited into ten thousand randomly-selected bank accounts."

The Messenger paused a moment to straighten his tie and allow this to sink in.

"Of course, participation in the lottery is completely optional, and you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part. For those of you who do not wish to participate, simply dial the number on the bottom-left of your invitation, and you will receive your consolation prize of two thousand dollars in cash within twenty-four hours."

Solomon's fear and confusion was rapidly fading, and a blind fury taking its place. The drugs were wearing off, and the numbness slowly leaving his limbs. He wanted nothing more than to burst from his confines and dismember the Messenger with his bare hands. But it was useless. These chairs were designed to restrain convicts five times his size.

"You have until midnight tomorrow to make your decision, after which the offer expires and you will receive nothing."

For someone so used to being in control, this was pure torture. Solomon had never felt so helpless in all his life.

Even though the individual members of Discordia had agreed to lay low for a while, it didn't take much to convince them all to regroup for one last jam. Lachlan called them together to pitch this final stunt – one in which they would go out with a bang.

It was their chance to create history by pulling off the single greatest act of rebellion ever.

They recruited as many people as they could to make it happen, and everyone they approached immediately agreed to help out. No one was about to pass up the chance to stick it to the mega-wealthy; these selfish egomaniacs who had spent their lives greedily accumulating massive fortunes with no regard for those they hurt in the process, and depriving resources from the ones that needed them the most.

Everyone had fantasized at one time or another that something like this might occur, and these tyrants would be held to account and given a taste of their own medicine. But no one dreamed it would ever come to fruition.

They began by slowly infiltrating the lives of each of the thirteen Consortium members. Documents were forged, identities stolen, accounts hacked, assets seized and safe havens raided. Discordia meticulously plundered everything they could get their hands on – stocks, bonds, properties, cash, jewelry, gold bullion, priceless artworks, vintage cars – and eventually made off with over six trillion dollars in assets, or close to seventy percent of their combined wealth.

The thirteen Consortium members were sedated, then transported to a rented warehouse and strapped into their restraints.

Hiring the Messenger to deliver the news was Alice's idea. She thought it would be the perfect layer of icing on an already delicious cake.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the cooperation of the Consortium members' many loyal employees; their drivers, butlers, bodyguards, secretaries, chefs, personal assistants, and so on. Alice's near-inexhaustible fortune opened many doors, and staff were easily persuaded to turn against their employer. Loyalty appeared to dematerialize the second someone laid eyes on a briefcase full of cash.

When ordinary people were presented with extraordinary amounts of money, free will became something of an elastic concept. After all, everyone has their price.

The chair's restraints snapped open, and the captives were freed.

They looked to the Messenger, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had somehow slipped out of the room without anyone noticing.

The thirteen members of the Consortium traded uneasy sideways glances, unsure what to say or do next. Many were still quite woozy, their bodies as limp and languid as dying house plants.

They knew they should discuss what had happened in a calm and orderly manner, then figure out what course of action needed to be taken from here. They had all been victims of a serious crime. Immediate steps should be put on place to hunt down the perpetrators and recover what was stolen.

But no one moved, and none of them spoke.

The room crackled with an electric silence.

The thirteen people inside this room once had a combined net worth greater than the world's poorest eight billion. Now, nearly two thirds of that had been wiped out in a single hit.

All still controlled vast fortunes. Empires worth many billions of dollars. Enough to live fabulously decadent lifestyles a hundred times over. But was that enough? Once you've experienced life with three-quarters of a trillion dollars to your name, how could you possibly go back to a mere eighty billion? What sort of power would that exert?

And what sort of power could you exert with a mind-boggling six trillion?

The exact same thought entered the brains of all thirteen members simultaneously: the opportunity now existed for someone in this room to become the most powerful person in the history of human civilization.

The Messenger wasn't lying when he said he was offering a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Solomon Turner was the first to crack. He propelled himself out of his chair like a jack-in-the-box.

His legs gave way as soon as he put weight on them. He collapsed to the floor like a heavy sack of potatoes. His body was still recovering from its involuntary tranquilization.

He willed himself to move. There was no time to waste. Time was money.

He pulled the gag from his mouth, then staggered to his feet and scrambled out the door like a newborn foal just learning to walk.

He reached for his APhID with one hand and his invitation with the other. He had to dial that number.

The greatest contest yet had begun.

A Note From The Author

For those of you who have made it this far, I would like to thank you for taking the chance on an independent writer, and for sticking with the book all the way through to the end (assuming you read the whole thing, and haven't just skipped forward to see what happens).

In this day and age of increasing entertainment options and decreasing attention spans, all writers face an uphill battle in having their work reach a potential audience. In many ways, writing the novel is the easy part. The real struggle lies in convincing the reader to give up hours of their lives to actually sit down and read something – especially when it has been written by an author they may never have heard of. The reader takes a giant leap of faith when selecting a book based on nothing more than a cover image, a blurb, and a handful of reviews.

Writing is an activity I do purely for my own enjoyment – there isn't a lot of money in free and ninety-nine cent downloads. But that's okay, because receiving feedback from readers is something I find so much more rewarding. It lets me know that I'm on the right track, and it gives me the motivation to keep on going.

So if you did enjoy *All Against All*, I would be especially grateful if you could take just a few minutes to leave a quick review at the site you downloaded it from, on social media, or a forum such as Goodreads. Also, feel free to share this book with any of your friends if you feel they may enjoy it too.

Best wishes and keep reading!

Nathan Allen

April 2016

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