

"Pure autism."

-- The Las Vegas Review Journal

RORY B. BELLOWS

CASTLES MADE OF

VAPOR

A TIPS FEDORA MYSTERY



Chapter 1

October 12, 2022. 4:14 PM.

The first thing I want to say, above all else, is that I hate the homeless. Literally and figuratively. Everyone says that we should help the homeless, but I think that is a terrible idea. An absolute waste of time and money. Maybe that's a Problematic thought, maybe not. I don't even know anymore, but all I know is I think it's a bad idea.

Pretty much anything else you could possibly think of to do with resources would be a better use of resources than helping the homeless. Like, anything at all. Build a giant staircase into the heavens that goes nowhere. Buy every polar bear from every zoo in the world and put them in a giant arena and have them all fight to the death. Pretty much anything that isn't helping the homeless is a better idea than helping the homeless. The homeless are beyond help. The homeless are a lost cause. Everyone needs to stop worrying about them. Maybe we could have them all secretly killed.

I say this because at this moment, I am sitting in a parked car on the corner of NW 4th and Couch Street, watching a homeless woman take a giant soft-serve shit on the sidewalk while peeing and singing to herself. I don't know what she's singing. I can't tell. All I know is that, eons ago, in a time I can barely remember, I watched 2girls1cup.wmv and laughed at it, but now I don't want to laugh anymore.

“O-oh my!”

Flutterbutts appears in the passenger seat next to me. She seems horrified by what she's seeing. I can't say that I blame her. I'm only slightly less horrified myself, probably because I watched 2girls1cup.flv in order to prepare myself for this, although I hadn't known at the time that it was training. Everything in life is training. Everything in this world is connected. I take a sip of Monster™ Zero Ultra™ to steel myself for my trials ahead.

“You see?” I ask. The woman, meanwhile, pinches off a last steamy beef log and begins rubbing a newspaper along the inside of her crack. She is still singing. “Do you see the ultimate futility of your Marxist ideals? What would role would you assign this person, where would she fit into the intricate clockwork of your ideal society?”

“I...I...I...” She can only stammer. Her long and sensuous pink mane flows around her graceful neck. She sits back on her hindquarters and wraps her wings about her as if to ward off the horrible sight, yet she can't look away. Tears well up in her eyes. I'm not going to lie, it's giving me about half a chub to see her like this, even as the homeless woman scrapes the remaining stank off of her rancid crack with a copy of *The Asian Reporter*.

The homeless woman tosses the newspaper aside and begins wandering aimlessly up and down the street. Her pants are still down around her ankles, and still she sings, a wordless, atonal caterwauling that I eventually recognize as “Freebird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. I'm surprised she knows that song. I'm surprised anyone knows that song. I'm surprised I know that song, as the style isn't really my bag, and there are few places in recent memory where I might have heard it. All recorded copies of music designated Problematic have long since been purged from iTunes™, and there is no other legal way to obtain music.

“Ohmygahd! Thas fuggin disgusding!”

An inebriated voice howls from somewhere nearby. I turn my head around to see. On the other side of the street is a tall, thin, scraggly man of about my age. From the intoxicated tone I'd been expecting to see another homeless guy, but this guy clearly has money. You can tell because he's dressed like a homeless guy.

My iPhone™ beeps beside me. I reach down and examine the screen. Looks like the guy I'm supposed to pick up won't be needing my services after all. Slow day I guess. I switch the app off and return my attention to the scene unfolding before me.

* *CRACK.* * * *THUMP.* * * *SMASH.* *

A glass bottle flies through the air, bonks off the homeless woman's head, and breaks into pieces on the ground. Instantly, the chorus of “Freebird” turns into a long, unbroken howl of confusion and pain. Not much different from when she was singing, really, but somehow there is a palpable change in her tone. I turn to see the thin scraggly guy shouting obscenities and waving his middle finger in the air.

“Shudthafugup, you stubid bitch!”

“Hey, what the fuck, did you just throw a bottle at her?”

The voice of a nearby pedestrian cuts through. As the woman collapses to the ground, holding her head in her hands and howling, various fluids once more spurting from various orifices, a small crowd begins to form. This situation looks like it could get ugly.

Meanwhile the guy, who dimly seems to realize that he might have overreacted a little, is swaying nervously from side to side, scratching his head as if in befuddlement at his own actions, as the pedestrians encircle the homeless woman. A few of them turn their attention to the guy, who would be walking quickly away right now if he had any common sense. Unfortunately he doesn't look as if he does.

Angry murmurs from the surrounding crowd begin to boil over into shouts and accusations. Several of the pedestrians, mostly obese women I notice, begin to turn their attention to the confused

man across the street. I've got the windows rolled up, but I can make out a few words. "Privilege."
"OhmygodIcanteven." "Problematic."

"Holy crap, is that guy going to catch a beatdown?"

Rainbow Darsh appears in the back seat and peers over my shoulder.

"Yeah, probably," I say, watching as several of the pedestrians begin to advance on the poor befuddled man. I start my engine.

I'm about to pull away, when a strange impulse seizes me. I roll down my window.

"Hey man, did you call for an Uber™?"

Several people turn their attention away from the guy, giving him a momentary reprieve from the mob justice about to be inflicted upon him. Our eyes lock. He stares drunkenly at me for a second, as if failing to understand what I meant. Then, suddenly, the lights click on and he stumbles quickly toward my vehicle.

"Hey! Get back here shitlord!"

One of the heavy harpies notices their quarry escaping, and makes a failed grab for the back of his shirt with a flabby claw. The rest of the crowd stands motionless, but I know the indecision will only last so long. I'm putting myself in a pretty dangerous situation here, really. You really don't want to interfere with mob justice in this town, but for some reason this poor idiot's plight seems to have moved me. Maybe it's just white male camaraderie, although I can't imagine that helping my defense should things take a wrong turn.

"Holy shit dude what are you even doing?"

Rainbow Darsh is snickering unhelpfully in the back seat. Flutterbutts is still shaking and rocking back and forth in the front seat, her wings wrapped around her. The poor dear looks pretty deliciously traumatized; I'd probably have more than a half chub right now if I didn't have more pressing things to worry about.

I flip off the lock on my doors just as the guy grabs the handle. He tumbles into the back seat and I slide the gearshift into Drive just as the door closes. A couple of tubby lasses seem to have figured out what's going on and are waddling towards us, but I maneuver deftly around them. Tires screech as I lurch around the corner, and just like that the danger is behind us.

The guy groans drunkenly from the back seat. Why am I even doing this? He's not a real fare; if he pukes then I won't be able to work again until it's cleaned, and good luck getting reimbursed.

"Hey man, if you're thinking about puking back there, don't."

"Immalright," the guy mumbles. "I'm sobrin up."

"Yeah, whatever. Where am I taking you?"

“Tage me home.”

He doesn't elaborate.

“Where's home? I don't know where you live, dumbass.”

The guy mumbles out an address in the Pearl. As I thought, he's got money. Young, rich, drunk and stupid; figures. Well, whatever, it's not like I'm doing anything better today. Fortunately his place isn't far from here.

I drive a few blocks and pull up in front of a swanky postmodern apartment complex. One of those bulky, boxy designs that's mostly glass and metal, designed to look like it was cobbled together out of yard debris, where a studio the size of a closet probably rents for a month's worth of my income.

I glance in the mirror. The guy is splayed out on the backseat, his eyes half closed, breathing noisily through his mouth. Rainbow Darsh tries to nudge him awake with a hoof, but of course he doesn't feel anything.

“Hey!”

He opens his eyes.

“Here we are.”

It takes him a couple of seconds to figure out what I'm saying, but when he looks out the window and sees his apartment building he seems to put the pieces together.

“Okay, thangs alot buddy. Whas your name, anyway?”

“Tips.”

He stares at me uncomprehendingly for a second, then reaches in his pocket.

“Nod sure whaddigod...”

I realize he must have misunderstood me.

“No, that's my name. Tips. Tips Fedora.”

He stares at me dumbly for a minute longer, until his liquor-addled mind appears to finish processing the information and a light of understanding appears in his eyes.

“Oh, ogay. Thassaweird name.”

I shrug. When he's right, he's right.

He stumbles out of my car, fumbles in his pocket, turns and tosses some money and a business card through my half-open window.

“We shoul'hangout someday.”

He turns and stumbles up to the front door. It takes him a painfully long time to fish out his key fob thingie to let himself in. However, eventually he manages to get the door open and go inside. I sit and watch for a moment until the door closes, and then my good deed for the year is officially done.

I turn my attention to what he threw in my car. I uncrumple the bill and see the stout face of Alexander Hamilton staring back up at me. Ten bucks. Wow, big spender.

I pick up the business card and examine it.

“Elroy R. Tennbox. Executive Coordinator.”

The address is on the other side of the river. Business is called “Splash.” Never heard of it. His title sounds like a makework job, but then again most of them are these days. Well, whatever. I toss the card into the glovebox, that forlorn tomb where things I save but will never never look at again go to be forgotten.

Briefly I consider hunting around for more fares, but I decide I've had enough excitement for the day. Besides, it's slow. I put the car back in Drive, and head off toward home. Elroy R. Tennbox. The name sticks in my head for some reason.

Chapter 2

January 9, 2023. 10:42 AM.

“Tadaima!”

I stroll in through the front door, a bag of groceries in my arms. Rainbow Darsh is lazing on the couch. She raises her head in annoyance as I step inside.

“Jeez, will you pipe down with that weeaboo crap? The neighbors already think you're weird. And close the door.”

“Stop being tsundere, baby. You know you love it.”

However, I take her advice and close the door. I slide the bolt into place and set the bag of groceries on the floor. Rainbow flaps her wings and floats over to the bag, rummaging around inside.

“Doritos™, white bread, peanut butter, Smuckers Strawberry Fruit Preserves™, Mountain Dew™. Same as last week. Jeez, how are you even still alive?”

I shrug.

“It's the breakfast of champions. Want to help me put it away?”

The look on her face shows that she is not amused.

I whistle to myself as I put the groceries away. My commieblock apartment is barely large enough to have a kitchen, but there's an area in the corner with a tiny stove rescued from the previous century and a sink, and some shoddily-built cabinets nailed to the wall over an old fridge. I put the chips and the bread in the cabinets, and pull open the door to the fridge. A familiar, unpleasant aroma that I think may be related to some takeout that's been in there a while wafts out, encouraging me to quickly conclude my business there. I trade my new bottle of Mountain Dew™ for a half-empty cold one and shut the door.

I shuffle over towards the couch, expertly navigating my way around the empty pizza boxes and two liter bottles scattered around the floor. I throw some mindless moeblob anime onto the TV and grab my laptop off the coffee table.

My emails are about as exciting as they were yesterday. A local politician has personally reached out to me because she knows I care about the environment. Someone with piss-poor grammar wants to help make my penis larger. Dominoes™ wonders if they can tempt me with some mouth-watering cinna sticks. There's a good chance that they can.

Sadly, though, nobody seems interested in hiring the services of Tips Fedora, Private Dick. Can't say I'm surprised, but I usually check anyway. My PI business is nowhere near as successful as my transportation business. My transportation business, incidentally, is nowhere near as successful as

my primary business, which is mostly collecting neetbux and watching anime, but what the hell. I wonder if I should stop marketing myself as a “Private Dick;” it could be sending the wrong impression. Who knows, the outmoded term might even be considered Problematic these days.

I stop scrolling for a second.

“Tennbox, Elroy.”

I read the name field of the message out loud. The subject header just says “Drinks.” Doesn't look like a work offer, but the name sounds familiar for some reason. I glance at the coffee table my unwashed feet are currently resting on and notice a crinkled ten dollar bill sticking out from underneath a plate. A dim memory slowly floats to the surface of my brain, an image of a drunk man about to be pummeled by a mob of corpulent roasties. I drove him home as I recall, about three months ago. The ten dollar bill was my compensation, but for some reason I still have it on my coffee table.

“Oh, yeah. That guy. Wonder what he wants?”

I skim the email. It's pretty straightforward, guy wants to have lunch today. Wants me to pick him up at work around one. I glance at the clock; I could probably manage that. Didn't really have anything else planned for today, at any rate. I wonder how he even remembers me. He must have found me through my PI website. He was so drunk I'm surprised he even remembered my name. I reach out and pick up the ten dollar bill.

“What is that?” asks Flutterbutts, materializing on the couch next to me.

“It's a portrait of Hamilton,” I say, holding the bill up to the light.

She squints at it curiously, and then wrinkles her nose in distaste.

“Money is the opiate of the capitalist bourgeoisie,” says Flutterbutts. “You shouldn't have accepted that.”

“I shouldn't do a lot of things,” I said, “And in any case, the money I make is what pays for the roof over your head.”

“You get this place for free,” calls out Rainbow Darsh from the sleeping nook.

“Nobody asked you,” I shout back.

Chapter 3

January 9, 2023. 1:18 PM.

I glance at the address on the business card one more time and back at the numbers on the old brick building. This is definitely the place, although if it wasn't for the word "Splash" lettered on the glass of the door in some art-deco font I'd never have known there was even a business here. The building is an old industrial-looking brick warehouse, although I doubt there's been any wares housed in here for at least half a century. Faded white paint on the side of the wall advertises the name of some long-forgotten company that probably built this place God knows when. Light rain patters down, running rivulets down the moss-stained bricks. I wonder what "Splash" does exactly? Probably just another pack of self-important hipsters playing pinball and pretending to develop phone apps or something.

I pull open the door and head inside. The interior lobby is painted bright blue, with unframed photos of bicycle parts printed on canvas hanging in a neat row along the wall. A couple of uncomfortable looking but apparently stylish chairs are arranged around a beat up old coffee table with some design magazines spread out on top. An unfriendly looking person with lime green hair whose gender is probably a touchy subject is sitting behind an ugly metal desk, staring at the screen of an iMac™ and purposely ignoring me.

"Hello?" I query.

Xe looks up, visibly annoyed.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Tips Fedora here to see Elroy."

Xir taps xens fingers against the desk, making an annoying drumming noise.

"Who?"

"Tips Fedora."

"No, I mean the other name. Who is Elroy?"

"Elroy Tennbox." I pull out the business card. "He works here. I'm meeting him for lunch."

Xenu glances at the card and frowns disdainfully.

"Oh. You mean Samantha's husband. Yeah, I'll call him for you."

Xerox™ quickly taps out some kind of internal communication and fires it off with the click of a mouse.

"He'll be out shortly."

I nod pleasantly and rock back and forth on my heels, hands in the pockets of my trench coat.

Xylophone glowers at me.

“You're welcome to take a seat.”

I smile and tip my fedora, and head off toward one of the uncomfortable looking chairs.

“What's that guy's problem?”

Rainbow Darsh materializes, floating angrily around the room and glowering at X the Eliminator. Obviously I can't answer her.

I thumb through one of the magazines, disinterestedly flipping through a photo spread of what apparently passes for an art exhibition these days. I'm trying to make sense out of a photograph of a man with nipple rings sexually harassing a toilet, when Elroy appears in the hallway.

“Tips Fedora!”

He addresses me like an old friend, even though this is only the second time in my life I've ever spoken to him. However, I accept the greeting pleasantly and stand up, tossing the art magazine back on the table.

“Hey there, Elroy. Long time no see.”

He nods, and turns to address the chupacabra sitting at the desk.

“Steph, we're stepping out for a bit.”

Xenocryst shoots him a rather unpleasant looking fake smile and says nothing. Elroy looks as if he's about to say something more, then apparently changes his mind and gestures to me.

“C'mon.”

I shrug indifferently and follow him out onto the street. I can feel X gon' give it to ya glaring daggers into our backs as we head outside.

Chapter 4

January 9, 2023. 1:31 PM.

Rain drums softly against the roof of my Jeep™. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of the stereo. “Songbird,” written and performed by Kenneth Bruce Gorelick, from the 1986 album *Duotones*. Designated Problematic in June of 2019 for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™. If Elroy R. Tennbox is upset at my playing contraband on my stereo he doesn't say anything. He sits in the passenger seat, glowering moodily out the window.

He hasn't said anything since we got in the car. I don't say anything either. I barely know this guy; I've got no reason to try to fill the air with pointless small talk. If he wants to talk, he can talk. If not, I'm no worse off than I would be if I were driving alone.

“You married, buddy?” he says suddenly.

I glance over and shoot him an irritated look. I don't mind driving him around or keeping him company if that's what he wants, but I'll be damned if I let anyone talk to me like a cabby when I'm not being paid.

“You know, I don't think we've been properly introduced,” I tell him. “My name's Tips Fedora. You can call me Tips, or you can call me Mr. Fedora; your choice. If you're looking for a ride and someone to unload your problems on, I'm probably cheaper than a shrink. Just let me know so I can flip the meter on.”

He glances back and seems to realize that he was being rude.

“Sorry. I wasn't trying to be a dick,” he says. “I've just got a lot on my mind these days. You want to get something to eat?”

“Sure. You got a place in mind, or are you good with one of my haunts?”

“Any place that serves booze.”

Somehow that doesn't surprise me.

Chapter 5

January 9, 2023. 2:17 PM.

About an hour later we're sitting at a table in a little lunch place I enjoy, scarfing down kalua pig and mac salad and drinking some sort of fancy craft beer. Elroy's had six of them; I've had one. The guy can really put them away, and after about fifteen minutes of listening to his woes it's pretty easy to figure out why. He's not a complicated man, just unhappy. Kind of a moody prick, morbid sense of humor, but he'd probably even out if the right woman ever came along. There's probably a million guys just like him walking around right now with the same problem in every city on Earth.

Unfortunately for him, the right woman is probably not going to come along, or if she does it's a shame for him, because he's stuck with the wrong one. He never mentions his wife's name, but I remember La Creatura back at the office referring to her as Samantha. She sounds like a real piece of work; I take a moment to thank White American Jesus that I had the good sense to skip the dating game and settle down with a pair of nice equine hallucinations.

He talks a lot about Samantha. Well, to be honest, he talks pretty much exclusively about her, and none of it is pleasant. He gets louder and angrier the drunker he gets, but from what I've seen of his personality so far I doubt he'd have the balls to raise his voice like this to her face. It's pretty easy to see that Elroy R. Tennbox is an empty shell, a poor, bedraggled man on a leash whose only comfort in life is getting good and soused.

In spite of that, though, I find to my surprise that I like him, so I don't mind too much when he orders another round. The waitress has learned quickly, and has a freshly opened bottle on the table for him almost as soon as his hand goes up in the air. She hands me another one as well, even though I didn't ask.

"Hey, I'm sorry to lay all this on you." He looks down his thick black hipster glasses at me, his eyes clouded with alcoholic haze.

I shrug and take a sip of my beer.

"No trouble for me I guess," I say. "Sorry to state the obvious, but if you hate this woman so much, why do you stay with her? Wouldn't it be easier to just leave?"

He smiles cynically.

"Money." he says simply.

"That's it?"

"Yep." He downs his entire beer in one long chug and sets the bottle down on the table. He's about to motion to the waitress for another one, but I catch her attention first and motion for the check

instead. She nods sympathetically and heads for the register.

“Do you think I'm pathetic?” he asks.

I shrug again.

“I've seen people stick it out for dumber reasons than that.”

“Like what?”

“Love, for one.”

That gets a cackle out of him. The waitress walks by and leaves the check. Elroy looks like he's about to call her back, but I interject first.

“Sorry, I'm a bit of a lightweight, and I've still got to drive. Besides, don't you need to be getting back?”

He blinks at me for a moment, his brain churning awkwardly for a moment until he eventually seems to process what I said.

“What, you mean Splash?” He laughs. “Naw, I don't do anything there. C'mon, let's go to Quarterland.”

Chapter 6

January 9, 2023. 8:40 PM.

In the end, Elroy took the longest lunch I've ever seen. We hit Quarterland, and spent the afternoon playing Contra and Pac Man. Elroy insisted I order anything I want, so I reluctantly stuffed myself with a quantity of bacon cheddar fries that probably would have downed a lesser man, and nursed a single beer. Meanwhile Elroy proceeded to swallow enough booze to drown a baby elephant. His bar tab had to be in the hundreds by the time we finally left. He wanted to go barhopping afterward, but the sky was already dark and I said I had to work, so I dropped him off at home and proceeded to flip on my Uber™ app so as not to make a liar out of myself.

It's a slow night, so I spend most of the evening cruising around and listening to music. I'm probably wasting more in gas than I'm earning in fares, but I don't really care that much. It's been raining off and on all day, and right now it's raining just the right amount for maximum comfy. Smooth jazz on the stereo. "Cafe Amore", written by Chet Catalo. Beautifully performed by Spyro Gyra on their 1980 album *Carnaval*. Designated Problematic in December of 2021 for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™.

Rain patters down on the roof. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. Warm pools of artificial light reflect gently off of rain-soaked streets. Every now and then I see people darting in and out of bars and restaurants. Sometimes they get in my car and I drive them places. Some of them are drunk and talkative, like Elroy; some of them are like me, and don't say anything. Some of them ask me to turn off my pirated problematic music and put on something more to their liking, most of them either don't notice or don't care.

Things change, but you get used to them. I can dimly remember a time when things around here looked different. There weren't as many of these ugly, trendy, boxy buildings all over the place. You could still buy revolving plastic music discs legally. You didn't need VPNs and darknet routing to access the fun parts of the Internet. I can still sort of remember being young, running around in a yard, being excited about birthdays. I had a mother, a couple of sisters too as I recall, but it all feels like someone else's life now, even though I suppose it wasn't that long ago. *I should call them*, I think, even though I know I probably won't.

My phone hasn't beeped in a while, so I switch off the app and start heading for home. The Spyro Gyra album loops back to track one, so I eject it and slide it into the little vinyl holder I keep hidden in the center console. My car is old enough to still have a player for revolving discs, which I was pretty thrilled about when I bought it. The players aren't illegal, and technically neither are the

blank discs I use, you just can't put anything on them if you want to stay on the right side of the Bureau of Copyright Enforcement. I pull out another disc and squint at my sloppy handwriting. *Neon at Night* by Blue Knights, recorded in 1994. Still available on iTunes™ last time I checked, although most of the rest of their catalog was pulled without explanation in June of 2022. I slide the disc into the player.

Rain patters on the roof. The windshield wipers swish. Illegally copied smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of the speakers. Rainy street after rainy street drifts by. Old Victorian houses retrofitted with blocky postmodern additions float past my windows, until eventually I cross 82nd and the scene changes to tacky dollar stores and big, ugly commieblock apartments.

The commieblocks are a fairly new addition to the skyline, and as long as you work (or pretend to, at least) you can lease one from the government for free or next to nothing. They were originally conceived by some previous mayor as a solution to public outcry over homelessness and high rents. Now, years later, rents are just as high and there's still homeless people everywhere; in fact if anything there's more of them. The commieblocks are mostly occupied by directionless single men and a small handful of women* too incompetent even to cut it as diversity hires. All things considered it was an expensive solution that solved absolutely nothing, which made it politically brilliant. Some of the homeless camps got temporarily cleared out or pushed further into the woods, low-income stiffs like yours truly got shitty apartments for free, and as soon as we did the public outcry mysteriously died down. Ambitionless males can be bought off cheap.

I make a quick stop at Plaid Pantry™ and pick up a bag of Funyons™ and another two liter of Mountain Dew™. Back at the apartment, my imaginary pastel pony friends are waiting for me, and greet me warmly when I walk in the door. I check my email (still no PI work) and spend the rest of the evening watching anime.

Chapter 7

April 13, 2023. 11:48 PM.

For another three months, my life stayed pretty much the same. Elroy R. Tennbox began popping into it more frequently, and we got to be pretty good friends. I haven't had a friend in longer than I can remember, and I have to say it's a nice little break from routine. We formed a tentative habit of hitting a particular bar on Friday nights (a place I like, where the prices aren't too high and the kitchen serves something that isn't called "fusion food"). Elroy doesn't really care where we go as long as he can get smashed. I drive, and he picks up the tab; it's a pretty good arrangement. Sometimes I pick him up at work and we go for lunch. I've been to his place a few times and met his wife, who I find to be every bit as pleasant as Elroy made her out to be.

However, I haven't heard from him in a couple of weeks. I woke up early this morning, and took advantage of the pleasant weather to power-run about a hundred dollars worth of fares during morning and lunch rush. The PI business is as slow as ever, so I decided to knock off around one and spend the afternoon at home, playing old video games on an antiquated vacuum-tube television I keep in my sleeping nook.

About a quarter to midnight Rainbow Darsh nudges a hoof into my arm and tells me that she's hungry, which I soon realize means that I'm hungry. I get up and head to the kitchen corner. I've got nothing left in the cabinets except two ramen packets and a box of Velveeta™ shells and cheese. I decide on the shells and cheese, and get to work boiling some water.

Suddenly, my phone beeps on the coffee table. I've been staring at electrons bouncing off of phosphorous for so long I'd almost forgotten I have one. I head over and pick it up. A crinkled ten dollar bill underneath it becomes dislodged and floats down to the floor, so I pick it up and tuck it back under a plate.

There's a message on the screen. Sender is Tennbox, Elroy. Message just says "Come over. Quick."

I frown, and glance over at the pot on the stove. The water has started hissing but the surface is still. I shut off the stove and dump the water into the sink, then slip on my sandals, throw on my trench coat and fedora, and head out the door.

Chapter 8

April 14, 2023. 12:21 AM.

When I turn the corner onto Elroy's block, he's standing outside his building waiting for me. He's pacing around a lot, and looks agitated. A cigarette glows as he takes a long, deep puff. I frown; I've never seen him smoke before. I notice he's got a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. I pull up and drop the locks.

"I'm going to need you to put that out," I tell him. He stares at me blankly, so I nod to the cigarette in his hand. He glances at it as if he'd forgotten he was holding it, and then absent mindedly tosses it aside.

He stashes his duffel bag in the back, then climbs inside the car and doesn't say a word. We drive a few blocks in silence.

"Mind telling me what this is all about?"

He looks at me, that blank expression back on his face again. He reeks of liquor, like he's been swimming in it.

"Get on I5 and go north," he says finally, slurring his words.

I shrug and do as he asks. We hit the 405 and cross the river, merge onto the interstate and keep going. Elroy is just staring blankly out the window. Other than his rather heavy breathing and the reek of alcohol coming off of him I might as well be alone in the car, but at this point I'm pretty well accustomed to his moody shit. Tonight seems different, though. Flutterbutts materializes in the backseat. I can hear her pacing around anxiously back there. She flaps her wings from time to time, drums her hooves against the window. She's agitated. That's not a good sign; it means I'm agitated too. There's something going on, probably something bad, something I might even be making myself an accomplice to. I don't feel a compelling need to ask questions, though.

I slide a plastic disc into my dash-mounted antique disc-revolver. *Enigma, MCMXC a.D.*, released appropriately in 1990. Designated Problematic and removed from iTunes™ in July of 2017, because of religious symbology in the cover art, as well as the title's use of the abbreviated Problematic term "Anno Domini." I'm proud to say that I own an original pressing of this album, complete with all Problematic artwork intact, however it's sitting on my shelf at home; I only keep burned copies of my music discs in the car.

Thinking about music relaxes me a little and keeps me from speculating about the laws that the souse next to me has probably broken, and how much more serious they probably are than Copyright Infringement. Flutterbutts settles down and stretches out on the back seat.

We cross the Columbia into Washington, and Elroy still hasn't said a word.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask.

Elroy had been nodding off a bit, and my voice jolts him awake.

"Vancouver," he says groggily.

"We're in Vancouver. Where specifically?"

He stares out the window for a second, then shakes his head.

"No," he croaks out finally. "Canada."

I open my mouth to speak, but the look on his face, momentarily illuminated by a passing streetlight, makes me close it again. I return my attention to the road, and keep driving. We go on in silence for a long while. The lights of the city gradually fade away until there's nothing but the faint moonlight and the white lines of the road whizzing by beneath us. In the backseat, I can hear Flutterbutts once more beginning to thrash around nervously.

Chapter 9

April 14, 2023. 5:17 AM.

The officer stared at our passports one more time, and then shone his light back into the cab. He shone the beam from Elroy to me and back to Elroy again.

“Your friend there looks intoxicated.”

“He is,” I say flatly. “That's why he isn't driving.”

The mountie narrows his eyes.

“Have you also been drinking, sir?”

I shake my head. The expression on his face doesn't change, and he holds the flashlight steady.

“No,” I say out loud. “You can test me if you want.”

He keeps the beam fixed on us for several seconds.

“Purpose of your visit?”

A thousand snarky responses come to mind, but I don't get the impression this guy has much of a sense of humor.

“Recreation,” I say flatly.

He glares suspiciously at me, fixes the beam on Elroy for a few seconds longer, and then returns our passports to us.

“Drive through,” he says, and raises the gate.

I glance in the mirror as we pull through. Flutterbutts is cowering in the back seat, her wings pulled up over her head.

“You can come out now,” I say, “He can't see you anyway.”

“What?”

Elroy looks at me with an expression of groggy confusion.

“Nothing.”

Elroy makes an atonal grunt and returns to staring out the window. He hasn't told me where to go, but on instinct I stay on the freeway for a while, and take an exit for Vancouver International Airport. I roll to a stop at Departures.

“I'm assuming this is where you get off?”

He stares at the airport in silence. For a moment it looks like he's about to start crying, then he reaches into the back seat. Flutterbutts springs up as he grabs the duffel bag he stashed on the floor. He gets out of the car, then pauses in the door for a moment.

“Look man,” he says, “I'm sorry about all of this. I can explain--”

I shake my head.

“I didn't ask and I don't want to know.”

He looks like he's about to say something else, then changes his mind and nods. He fumbles in his jacket pocket for a moment, then holds out a crinkled envelope. I wave my hand.

“Not necessary,” I say.

“It's for gas,” he says.

I stare at the bills for a moment, then look up at his face. The expression of desperation in his eyes eventually overrides my good judgement, and I accept the money. He laughs awkwardly and scratches the back of his head.

“Probably the biggest fare you've had in a while,” he says.

I smile.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Neither of us says anything more. He stands there for a moment or two, then nods tersely, slings his bag over his shoulder, and heads off into the terminal. I watch him go until he vanishes into the throng of people inside, then throw it in Drive and head back to the freeway.

Chapter 10

April 14, 2023. 10:38 AM.

The trip home occupies the better part of the morning. Except for a quick drive-through stop at a Jack in the Box™ in Seattle, I white-knuckle it all the way through. By the time I pull into the lot of my commieblock, I've cycled through all the plastic discs I've got in the car and am back on Enigma again. I make a mental note to burn out a few more selections before I go to work again.

Flutterbutts flaps sleepily in the air next to me as I make the laborious climb to the third floor. We both simultaneously yawn. I feel like I could crawl into bed and sleep for the next week. However, I'm not even remotely surprised to find my front door standing wide open, and a pair of uniformed officers inside my apartment, sifting through my belongings.

“Are you Tips Fedora?”

The first officer, a tall, well-built man of about forty with a crew cut and a black mustache, is such a perfect stereotype of a cop that I immediately deduce that he's going to be a giant pain in the ass.

“If not then I'm in the wrong house,” I answer. The officer frowns slightly.

“My name is Officer Collins. This is officer Dayley. We'd like to ask you some questions.”

“Do you have a warrant?” I ask.

Officer Dayley, also tall and well-built, is a slightly younger black man with a shaved head and a pair of aviator shades. His mustache is a little better trimmed. He's currently standing in front of the shelves next to the windows, idly browsing the spines of plastic jewel cases.

“Shit, he's got Herbie Hancock in here,” he says to Officer Collins, who doesn't seem interested or impressed. “Cantaloupe Island. I love that song.”

He turns to me and smiles, flashing a brilliantly white set of teeth, then steps forward and claps a friendly hand on my shoulder. A knot immediately forms in my stomach. Collins seems like a prick, but this guy is legitimately dangerous.

“Relax, kid. We ain't with Copyright Enforcement. We just want to ask you a few questions, that's all.”

I don't say anything. Dayley maintains a vice-like grip on my shoulder while Collins leans uncomfortably close.

“What's your relationship to Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson?”

I don't answer. Dayley squeezes my shoulder a bit.

“C'mon, son. Sooner we get this cleared up the sooner we can be out of your hair.”

I look from one to the other. Collins is a goony tough guy, just waiting for me to give him an

excuse to hit me. Dayley's face is the friendly and charming mask of a sociopath.

"I want to see your warrant," I say.

Dayley releases my shoulder, shakes his head and makes a clicking sound with his tongue. He turns back to the shelves and pulls out my original copy of Herbie Hancock's 1974 album *Dedication*, reading the song titles on the back, as Collins' fist goes flying into my stomach.

The wind goes out of me. White spots appear in the corners of my vision. With an angry howl, Rainbow Darsh comes flying out from the sleeping nook, her eyes bloodshot with rage and rabid slaver dripping from her muzzle. She charges full-speed into Officer Collins and goes right through him, careening headfirst into the wall on the other side with a loud crash and dropping to the floor with a pathetic plop. She stands up, bruised and dazed, blinking in confusion.

As I gasp for breath, Dayley slides the disc back into place on the shelf, and turns around to face me again.

"See, here's the thing, son," he says, still smiling his pearlescent smile. "We've got a dead body on our hands, so we're in a bit of a hurry today. Officer Collins here, he forgot that warrant on top of his desk, didn't you, Officer Collins?"

Officer Collins gives a terse nod and smiles unpleasantly.

"Yep. Left it right on my desk."

Officer Dayley clicks his tongue again and wags a finger.

"Now that was just a rookie mistake there, Officer Collins." He turns back to me, still grinning. "So, here's how this can go down. If you still want to see that warrant, you can come on down to the station with us and we'd be happy to show it to you. Still, that seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to over a silly little bit of protocol. But if you wouldn't mind just overlooking Officer Collins' tiny little clerical error and answering a few questions for us, we can be out of your hair in a jiffy and we can all just get on with our day."

I look up at him and say nothing. He clicks his tongue and turns back to my shelf once more. Officer Collins' fist comes sailing into my face.

"Mm-*mmm*, take a look at this, Officer Collins. Kid's got *Breezin'* by George Benson. He sure does have some quality stuff in here."

The world goes dim.

Chapter 11

April 16, 2023. 9:15 AM.

I lay on my back on the cold, hard jail cell mattress, thinking about Chuck Mangione's 1977 album *Feels So Good*. The title track is probably the most famous song in Mangione's entire catalog. The album, as well as the bulk of Mangione's work, was designated Problematic in August of 2012, and *Feels So Good* was one of the first prominent albums to be removed from iTunes™.

Although the official reason given was Cultural Appropriation, the highly publicized controversy was the result of Mangione's persistent vocal support of exiled filmmaker Mike Judge, creator of the television series *King of the Hill*, which had been designated Highly Problematic for Promotion of White Supremacy and removed from iTunes™ and Amazon-Netflix™ earlier that year. Subsequently, Best Buy™, the last retailer of physical music discs, pulled all remaining copies of his albums from their shelves, shortly before the company was bought out and dissolved by Apple™ in 2013. Though I have been able to track down digital files of all tracks from the album and assemble them in their proper order, along with high-resolution images of the cover art and inner liner sleeve, a physical copy of this recording has remained an elusive holy grail for me for a number of years.

Rainbow Darsh paces angrily in the corner, frothing dangerously at the mouth and snarling at unseen things on the other side of the cell bars. Flutterbutts, who despite being terrified of police and authority figures of all stripes decided to join me on my lonely stay, squats forlornly in the corner, whistling the title track's iconic melody line. The sound soothes me, and I find myself wishing I could drift off to sleep again, but unfortunately I've gotten about all the sleep I'm likely to get at this point. I don't know how much longer they plan to keep me here, but it looks like I'll be serving the rest of my time in the waking world.

I haven't heard a word from Collins or Dayley since they dropped me in here. I have no way of knowing how long I've been locked up, but it feels like it's been about two or three days. They never did show me that warrant, although I can't say I expected them to. I also have no idea what's going to happen, since nobody's told me a thing, but I figure at an absolute minimum they'll need to keep me on ice until the bruises on my face clear up.

Even without being told anything, I can put the pieces together easily enough on my own. As I suspected, Elroy was running from trouble the other night. As I also suspected, it was bad, and seems to involve his wife. I don't know for certain that she was murdered, but I doubt they'd be leaning on me this hard if it was just a simple domestic disturbance.

From what I can tell I'm being held as a non-cooperative person of interest, and I'm guessing if

Elroy doesn't turn up they might try to make me a suspect as well. Like I said I haven't heard a word from the two goombahs since they dropped me in here, which probably means they don't have much. I didn't give them anything when they questioned me and I don't plan on giving them anything when they question me again, so that probably won't change. They'll hold me as long as they legally can or until I crack, whichever comes first. Meanwhile, I've got a bed, a toilet, and a pair of imaginary flying ponies willing to whistle my favorite jazz tunes. They're going to find out I'm not such an easy guy to sweat.

To my surprise, I suddenly hear the door open at the end of the hall. The cells in here are all empty except for mine, so whoever it is must be here for me. Tenpenny and Pulaski probably got tired of waiting and decided to come in here and kick poor little White Carl around some more; good. If I can get them to put some fresh bruises on me I might even come out of this with leverage.

The guard, a weaselly little rookie cop about my age who tries entirely too hard to act tough, makes a big production out of cuffing me and leading me to the interrogation room. When he opens the door, instead of the goon squad I was expecting, I see a tall, slender woman in a suit. She's about a decade older than me, and if it wasn't for her androgynous purple-tinged crew cut and intentional lack of makeup, she'd probably be what men more interested in three-dimensional women than I am would call a "milf." She's definitely not a cop, but her clothes look a little too expensive for a public defender. I'm not quite sure what to make of her. She gestures for me to sit down across the table from her, and shoos the little pipsqueak out of the room after he removes my handcuffs.

"How are you holding up, Mr. Fedora?"

I stare suspiciously at her and don't answer. She sighs heavily and opens a briefcase.

"I'm not with the police, so you can let your guard down. Believe me, it's in your interest to be as open with me as possible. My name is Janet Callahan-McDougal, and I'm an attorney for the Vel Johnson family. I've been hired to represent you."

Vel Johnson. One of (the late?) Mrs. Elroy R. Tennbox's many hyphenated names, if I'm not mistaken. I'm now even more suspicious than ever. She seems to have been expecting that, and continues without pause.

"Looks like you didn't say anything to them, so that's good..." She skims through several pages of notes and reports, then puts them away and closes her briefcase. "I'll have you out of here within the hour, but you're not out of the woods yet."

Rainbow Darsh darts angrily from side to side, making faces at her.

"I don't trust her," whispers Flutterbutts, hovering close to my ear.

Neither do I, obviously, but I have to admit that she's probably the best chance I've got.

The lawyer looks me directly in the eye and smiles thinly.

“Don't worry too much, though,” she says. “They're after your friend, not you. Unfortunately, Portland PD is also under a lot of pressure to arrest someone quickly, before the media catch wind of it, so they might try to pin it on you.”

Rainbow Darsh screams, a stream of horrendous obscenities flying out of her mouth as her bloodshot eyes nearly bulge out of her skull. I've never seen her this worked up before. Flutterbutts is cowering in the corner, her wings wrapped protectively around her body. Despite all this, I maintain a calm facade.

“Do they have any evidence?”

She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Not unless you give them any. Or there's something you haven't told me. *Is there anything you haven't told me?*”

“Technically yes, but only because I haven't really told you anything yet.”

She smiles thinly again.

“Just sit tight and keep your mouth shut for now,” she says. “I have a feeling this is all going to blow over in a couple of days.”

She examines the bruises on my face for a second, then reaches into her briefcase again.

“While we're at it, let's get a few pictures of these.”

Chapter 12

April 16, 2023. 10:02 AM.

Good as her word, she has me back out on the street within the hour. As I pass through the station lobby, Collins gives me an impotent, angry spiel about not getting any funny ideas, because blah blah blah he's got eyes on me. Dayley is just staring daggers, standing sullenly in the corner with his arms crossed, his pearly smile finally gone. Good; someone higher up put a muzzle on those two, that must mean I somehow wound up with some powerful friends. Now the only thing I have to worry about is why exactly it's worth their trouble to help me.

I came here in the back of a police car, so I catch the train home. It's never been my preferred mode of transportation. On one side of me is a man with tattoos on his face and gage piercings in his ears large enough to toss a grapefruit through. On the other side is a pregnant Mexican girl who looks about fifteen and smells like bourbon and laundry detergent. Nearby, a deranged homeless man is walking up and down the length of the train car, urinating into his pants and babbling while the rest of the passengers ignore him like he's another figment of my imagination.

“Do you see the injustice inherent in your bourgeois system?” whispers Flutterbutts into my ear.

“No, but I'm starting to remember why I bought a car,” I whisper back to her.

At the Gateway transit center I exit the train and board a bus, filled with an almost identical sampling of the dregs of humanity, which takes me close enough to my commieblock to walk the rest of the way.

When I finally close the door to my apartment and bolt it behind me, a wave of relief washes over me. My apartment is tiny and cramped, smells like old garbage and mildew, and is probably made of shittier concrete than the last place I slept, but home is home. When I turn around and see the men standing inside waiting for me, Rainbow Darsh immediately makes the most ungodly banshee wail I have ever heard come out of her, and bashes her head against the wall until imaginary blood squirts out of her skull.

Chapter 13

April 16, 2023. 01:12 PM.

“Whassup.”

Three vibrant youths of color are standing in my living room, each one an anachronism from a different era. The one in the center is wearing a bright red suit, with a pristine white fur coat slung across his shoulders, the sleeves hanging limply at his sides. Gold jewelry glitters from every appendage it's possible to attach something shiny to. He leans with both hands on a fine mahogany cane tipped with a gilded carving of a duck's head. Atop his own head, cocked at an angle, sits a wide-brimmed hat, fire-engine red to match his suit with a long yellow feather sticking out of the band. To his left is a large rotund fellow dressed in a heavy dark blue denim jacket and baggy black jeans, with a red bandana around his head and a scowl on his face. A silver cuban link chain hangs around his neck. In the back, going through my music shelf, is a lanky guy in a bright multicolored tracksuit with a clock worn as a necklace, with an impressively maintained flat top and round sunglasses.

“Can I help you gentlemen?”

The large scowling one cracks his knuckles. The pimp in the mink coat smiles, and begins to walk a slow circle around me, tapping his cane pointedly on the carpet with every step.

“So this what a honkey project look like then?”

I hold still, saying nothing while Rainbow Darsh whizzes angrily around his head, making goofy faces at him behind his back. I crack a satisfied smile when a drop of blood from her earlier head wound drops down and makes a bright red spot on his coat. Pity he'll never know its there.

The pimp makes a full circuit of the room and stops, holding his face uncomfortably close to mine and smiling again.

“I grew up in a shittier place than this,” he says. “Got out though. I got all kinds of shit now. What you make in a month, white boy?”

I don't answer. He smiles.

“I can guess. You a cheap ass motherfucker, I can tell. Know what I make in a month? I don't even count it no more, that's what I make in a month. You cheap ass motherfucker.”

“Your father must be proud.”

Biggie Smalls cracks his knuckles again. Rudy Ray Moore stops smiling.

“You know who I am, motherfucker?” he asks.

I know who he is. Even if I didn't know him anyway he'd be hard not to recognize; he was on the cover of Portland Monthly Magazine™ last month. I don't say anything though.

“Answer him, bitch.” Fat Joe steps forward. Silky Johnson holds up a hand.

“Your name is Tyrone Air Jordan,” I say flatly. “Former street alias Smoov Macadamia. A pimp turned legitimate businessman who recently became the CEO of Nike™ Inc. You also control most of the drug traffic between here and Salem.”

I turn and address the large, intimidating fellow.

“Your associate there is Daquan Highfade-Jackson, better known by his rap alias Bigg Piney, an artist recently signed to your Smoov Grooves record label. The Fresh Prince pawing through my record collection over there is Ray Ray McRibb, his manager.”

Tyrone grins broadly and claps his hands.

“White boy ain't so dumb,” he exclaims. “Except for one thing: I control *everything* between here and *California*.”

“Some Medford boys might disagree with you on that; in fact I heard you lost a few trucks the other week.”

He scowls at that.

“Also, could you tell your friend over there to be careful with that, please?”

Ray Ray McRibb has taken down my copy of *As We Speak* by David Sanborn, released in 1982 and currently available on iTunes™, albeit with a disclaimer stating that it has been flagged for cultural review. He opens the jewel case and holds the disc up to the sunlight.

“Ray Ray, you be careful with the man's music now, you hear?” Tyrone calls over his shoulder. Ray Ray grins and nods an affirmative, and then goes back to examining the disc.

“That better?” says Tyrone. I don't answer. He grins again. “Now, you probably wondering why a busy man such as myself would even bother paying a visit to a cheap ass motherfucker like you.”

I shrug.

“I'm assuming it has something to do with Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson.”

“Ain't you just sharp as a tack.”

“Look,” I say, “I don't know how you're mixed up in this exactly, but I didn't say anything to Collins or Dayley and I'm not going to say anything to you.”

“Collins? Dayley? Who the fuck are they?” He turns to Bigg Piney and shrugs. “Think I keep track of every little pig around this rainy-ass dump?”

He leans menacingly close, his smile gone.

“Look, faggot. I ain't here for information. I don't give a fuck what you think you know or what you told the cops. I came here to tell you that whatever you think this is, it ain't.”

“Well, I appreciate you clearing that up.”

Bigg Piney moves remarkably quickly for such a big guy, and before I know what's happening his fist collides with my face. I take several steps backward. The room is spinning. Out of the corner of one eye I see Rainbow Darsh, spinning drunkenly around in the air. I can hear Flutterbutts sobbing in the corner.

“Thanks,” I say, leaning against the wall to steady myself. “It's been a few hours since I've been hit in the face, I was starting to miss it.”

“We can arrange a nice trip down memory lane for you, if you want,” says Tyrone. He grins broadly again, but there's no longer even a pretense of mirth in it. “Now here's the fuckin' deal, white boy. We know you drove that little bitch to Canada. We know the two of you was friends. You don't need to worry about him no more, because we gonna find him. From now on, you just stay out of it. I came here to tell you that from here on out, you ain't involved in this. You forget that, you gonna be in a whole fuckin' world of hurt.”

Bigg Piney socks me in the face one more time for good measure, and the next thing I know I'm lying on the floor looking up at the two of them standing over me. Ray Ray approaches from behind, holding my David Sanborn album, as well as my copy of *Sun Goddess* by Ramsey Lewis, released in 1974 and currently available on iTunes™.

“Scuse me, Macadamia, but I do believe that ownership of these discs is a violation of applicable copyright laws.”

Tyrone Air Jordan grins broadly and shakes his head.

“You better confiscate those, so we can make sure they get turned over to the proper authorities.” He motions with a hand, and the three of them step over my prostrate form.

“Cheap ass motherfucker,” I hear Tyrone say as they head out the door.

I lie on my back, staring at the ceiling as their laughter recedes down the hall. Flutterbutts is inconsolable, crying soft warm tears that drip onto my face and blubbering about the plight of the proletariat. Rainbow Darsh appears overhead, flapping her wings and hovering in the air. Her face mirrors my indignation. I smile, point my finger like a gun, and aim it at the ceiling.

“Bang.”

She spreads her lips in a manic, terrifying smile.

Chapter 14

April 16, 2023. 6:14 PM.

The modern world is a place of vague purpose. People like Elroy, with incomprehensible jobs and titles, spend their days in castles made of vapor, playing games on their phones or standing around chic, modern-looking break rooms, drinking soy-based beverages and chattering to each other. To them, what they do all day is work; important work even. The sun rises and sets on the work they do.

Somewhere behind it all is the incomprehensible mesh of wires that make the machinery run, the glowing fiber-optic cables that move information and piles of imaginary money from place to place. It's a complex and baffling network of interrelated systems, no doubt deliberately created at some point by somebody for some purpose, though what that purpose is I couldn't even guess. It's not for us to know, all of the dregs left over from whatever came before this; nothing for us to do but drift slowly and comfortably until we finally sink to the bottom.

Rain drums softly against the roof of my Jeep™. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of my speakers. "Bahia" by Claudio Celso, from his 1998 album *Brazilian Jazz*. Previously available on iTunes™, removed in August of 2020 without explanation. Suspected licensing complications.

It's a fairly average night. I pick up a couple of girls around my age at a trendy apartment building on SE Division. If they notice the bruises on my face they don't say anything. I drop them off at a bar downtown, and head around the block to pick up a rowdy group of middle-aged women and drop them off down the street. I drive up and down and all over, zigzagging back and forth across the river, south into Lake Oswego, out to Beaverton and back downtown again. People get in and out of my car, most of them varying degrees of insufferable. Some of them want to talk, most of them don't. I prefer the ones that don't.

A little later I end up at another bar downtown and the same two girls from before get in, both of them falling down drunk. If they remember me they don't say anything. One of them plugs her phone into my USB jack without asking and I have to spend the trip listening to Taylor Swift™ caterwaul over a stuttering drum machine. By the time I drop them off I'm pretty happy to be rid of them.

I switch off the Uber™ app and head home. I cross 82nd and the scene changes from hipster blocks into commieblocks. I run through the drive through at Taco Bell™ on the way. Back at home, the poners are waiting for me, and we watch bootlegged episodes of the Twilight Zone while I eat my meal.

While Rod Serling's voice drones pleasantly in my ear, I check over my daily news feeds.

Looks like the media caught on to the story about Elroy; it's all over the local Portland channels. Turns out my assumptions were correct, too: Samantha had been murdered, found bludgeoned to death in a motel room on SE Powell, and her husband Elroy is currently the prime suspect. There's not a whole lot of information to go on, but the details they do mention are pretty interesting. They don't say the name of the motel, but I know the neighborhood they're talking about. It's on my side of 82nd, which says plenty, and unless you're looking for drugs or hookers there's not really much reason to be hanging around there.

I close the news feeds and skim my email. The politician who has been desperately trying to reach me is concerned that I might not have gotten her last email, but she wants me to know that for the next 24 hours she will personally match any contribution I'm willing to give her. The guy who wants to enlarge my genitalia has a limited time offer he thinks I'd be interested in. The offer on the cinna sticks has expired, but they've got a new special on wings that might be worth investigating.

I'm about to turn in for the night when something catches my eye. Someone saw the ad for my PI business, wants to hire me. It throws me off guard. I've channeled so much energy into pretending to be a PI that it never occurred to me what I might do if someone actually tried to give me a job.

I open the email and read through it. I'm immediately suspicious, especially in light of everything that's happened recently. The job is in Medford, he wants me to drive out there tomorrow morning. Pay is suspiciously high. Preposterously high, even. Client is an obviously made up name. If I show up, seems like a pretty good bet I'll come home with some fresh bruises. That's assuming I come home at all.

“What do you think?” I ask Rainbow Darsh.

She looks sullenly over at me. Her eyes have that crazed bloodshot look again; I don't think I've heard her speak more than a few words in days. When she's around she mostly floats in the corner, grinding her teeth and muttering. I'm a little worried. I've been pretty wrapped up in my own affairs lately; maybe I should try to spend a little more time with my hallucinations.

“Do it,” she says finally. “What's the worst thing that could possibly happen?”

“Whoever sent this message kills me and dissolves my corpse in acid.”

She shrugs, and goes back to grinding her teeth and staring at the television.

Meanwhile, Flutterbutts is reading the email over my shoulder.

“Oh, no,” she says. “You can't take this job. It's far too much money.”

“Well then, we're in luck, because I seriously doubt I'm going to get paid.”

Chapter 15

April 17, 2023. 10:53 AM.

I roll to a stop outside a mansion I immediately recognize. Address is on N Oregon St. in Jacksonville, just outside Medford. The Nunan House, inspiration for the haunted mansion from the 1992 puzzle adventure *The 7th Guest*, published by Virgin Interactive™ and developed by Trilobyte™. If I'd known this was the place I was going I'd have brought my camera along. A quick photo on my phone is the best I can do, but I know it won't do the place justice. My mood brightens immediately; if I'm going to get murdered, I can't think of a better place to do it.

Neighborhood looks like it's gone to shit, but nothing about that surprises me. Frankly, most neighborhoods have gone to shit, even the ones that are supposed to look like they haven't. This was probably a swanky area at one point in the distant past, but nobody with money wants to live around here anymore. Nobody except my mystery client, apparently.

The extensive grounds are ringed by a tall, unfriendly looking iron fence, overgrown with vines and a rather poorly maintained hedge behind it. Against the backdrop of an overcast sky, the place looks every bit the haunted mansion. Whoever lives here is either a fan of the game or else he doesn't want visitors. There's an intercom set into one of the gateposts, and a tinny voice answers when I press the button.

“Yes?”

I clear my throat.

“Tips Fedora here. I have an appointment with Santos L. Halper.”

“An appointment with who?”

The voice sounds annoyed, and my pockets immediately begin to fill with spaghetti. I'd been so preoccupied with the idea that this was a trap that I hadn't even considered the far greater likelihood that someone is just screwing with me.

“Uh...Santos L. Halper?”

I feel like a total dipshit.

“There's no one here by that name.”

The voice on the other side states the obvious. Well, it looks like I took a four hour drive for nothing. Live and learn I suppose. I'm about to turn around and leave, when the tinny voice comes through the speaker again.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Uh, Tips Fedora.”

There is a rather longish pause, and suddenly I hear a loud click as the gate swings open.

The interior grounds are pretty poorly maintained. The grass is tall and choked with weeds; a few trees and some rusty lawn furniture are about all there is to the front yard. The paint on the house is chipping, and the floorboards on the porch creak ominously as I approach the front door and ring the bell.

A surly-looking man of about 50 answers the door. He's got a shaved head and scraggly white stubble on his face, pretty strong-looking arms for a guy his age too. His face is deadpan and emotionless, but there's a sharp gleam to his eye that assures me he's watching my every move. I assume he's either a veteran or an ex-cop.

"Are you Santos L. Halper?" I ask. The guy gives me a bemused look.

"Library," he says, and points toward a door.

I step into a dusty, cheerless room, lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves. Thick curtains are pulled tight over the windows. An old, thin, tired-looking man sits behind a desk in the corner.

"Sit down," he says, pointing to a chair nearby. His raspy voice reminds me of William Burroughs.

"Are *you* Santos L. Halper?" I ask as I lower myself into the chair. He rolls his eyes.

"Sorry about the subterfuge," he says. "My name is Reginald Vel Johnson."

That name again. Vel Johnson.

"You're the guy who got me out of jail yesterday."

He nods.

"I am."

"I'm assuming this is the part where I find out why?"

"I bailed you out because I want to hire you."

Surprise probably shows on my face.

"This is an actual job then?"

"Yes, the email I sent you is accurate. Sorry about the false name, but I worried you might not come if I told you my real one. I want you to find Elroy Tennbox for me. I'm willing to pay you eleven thousand dollars if you can track him down. Cash; no invoices or receipts. This is a strictly off the books type of job, so the sudden spike of income shouldn't affect your...living situation."

I don't answer.

"Is the amount not to your liking?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"The money's fine. More than fine. What I want to know is, what are you going to do with him

when I find him for you?"

He smiles.

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"It makes sense that I would. He killed your daughter, after all."

His expression darkens.

"Did he? I'm afraid I don't know anything about that."

I might have crossed a line there, but I keep talking anyway.

"That's what the police seem to think. They're looking for him too. Some gangsters in Portland are also after him, for some reason."

He shrugs.

"Seems like all the more reason you should want to find him first. He's your friend, isn't he?"

I nod but don't say anything else. He sighs, drums his fingers, and then apparently decides he owes me an explanation.

"I haven't spoken to my daughter in years," he says. "I was deeply saddened when I learned that she was dead, but I'm afraid I wasn't surprised. Did you know her?"

"Only through Elroy."

"Then you might already know that she led something of a fast life, and had connections with some rather unsavory people. As I said, her death saddens me, but it doesn't surprise me. I always found Elroy to be a rather decent man, and I don't believe that he killed her. I want to help him, if I can, before this situation gets too far out of hand."

I look him over steadily. He doesn't look like he's lying, but I can't figure out what to make of him. He's a thin, scraggly old man; looks like the kind of guy who's had a comfortable but unhappy life and doesn't expect it to get much better at this point. His clothes are a lot like his house: expensive looking but not well cared for. Nothing in his demeanor makes me mistrust him, but there's still something bothering me.

"Why me?" I ask. "I'm not saying I won't take your money, but I can't imagine I'm actually worth eleven grand to you as a private eye."

He shakes his head and chuckles a little.

"No, you're certainly not. You're just a kid playing make believe. That's okay, that's all that most people are anymore. I want to hire you because you were the last person to see Elroy, and because you're his friend. You drove him across the border, and may know where he was headed and how to reach him. I'm paying you generously because I can afford to and because I want to encourage you to handle the matter quietly. Have I addressed all of your concerns to your satisfaction?"

I look him over some more and decide I probably haven't got much to lose.

“What the hell, I'll take your money. Congratulations, you've just hired an eleven thousand dollar fake detective.”

He smiles.

“Wonderful.”

We shake hands, and he offers me a drink. I politely decline, and ten minutes later I'm back on the road, thinking about the deal I just made. I wonder who this Vel Johnson guy really is. I wonder if he's going to actually pay me once I find Elroy, or if he's going to take the safe route and just put a bullet in both our heads. I wonder if I can even find Elroy, or if I should even try. I wonder what the pimp and his goons, or for that matter the Portland PD, will have to say about it.

Chapter 16

April 17, 2023. 5:18 PM.

“I really don't think you should have accepted that money.”

Flutterbutts lectures me from next to me on the sofa, while I nod absent-mindedly, scrolling through chat logs and forum posts. The Dark Web is a large and bustling community these days, practically a separate internet in its own right, since pretty much anything not owned or licensed by Alphabet-Apple™ has had to go underground by necessity. Of course, the darker elements that made the Dark Web what it is was to begin with are still here as well. One of the forums I browse regularly basically amounts to a gossip mill for all things involving the Northwest underworld, and there's very little that goes on in the area that escapes the attention of these curmudgeonly dweebs. If I'm going to learn anything about the exact nature of the trouble Elroy is in and where he might have gone to escape from it, this will be the place to start.

Of course, I don't really have a whole lot to go on. If he'd smuggled himself out of the country illegally there's a couple of major players in the area who handle that sort of thing, and I could probably get a general direction by making a few inquiries to the right people. Unfortunately though, he'd slipped out legally before the police were on to him; that means he could be pretty much anywhere.

I sigh and close my laptop. Who the hell am I kidding? I don't have the slightest idea how to go about finding someone who's left the country. Keeping up on local underworld gossip isn't quite the same thing as actual detective work, I'm beginning to realize. Maybe I should just call Reginald Vel Johnson and tell him I have no idea what the fuck I'm even doing.

“...and that is why the people must rise up, and claim the Workers' utopia that is theirs by right.”

Flutterbutts concludes her lecture and looks at me expectantly. Ordinarily I'd banter back and forth with her about this, but today I'm just not in the mood. Instead I give her an affectionate scratch behind the ears and haul myself up off of the couch.

“I'm going out for a bit.”

She looks at me curiously, a concerned look in her eyes, but she nods and lays down on the couch. I grab my keys, throw on my trench coat and fedora, and slip my sandals on my feet. Rainbow Darsh comes flying out of the sleeping nook and follows me out the door.

Chapter 17

April 17, 2023. 6:04 PM.

I park on the street a couple blocks away from Elroy's building and swipe my neetbux card in the parking meter. It's raining a little but not too badly, so I don't mind the short walk down to his building. The building's locks, including the front door and the doors to all the units, are operated by RFID chips embedded in key fobs. Elroy gave me one a couple of months ago so I could let myself in and out, and his neighbors are probably used to seeing me around. If any of them know we're friends and follow the news I might get stopped by somebody, but that's a risk I'm just going to have to take.

I swipe my key fob again and take the elevator all the way to the top. Elroy and Samantha's penthouse unit takes up the entire topmost floor, and the elevator opens directly onto their living room. The apartment has clearly been tossed by the cops, but it doesn't look like they're here anymore. In the living room, furniture has been knocked over and moved aside. Drawers and cabinets are all hanging open, their contents tossed rudely onto the floor. I'm guessing the police probably took anything of interest with them, but I'd still like to check the place out for myself.

I go through each of the rooms. The place can barely be called an apartment; the unit is larger than the house I grew up in. Elroy had never gone into much detail about his financial situation, but from where they lived and how he spent, it's clear that money wasn't a problem for him. However, I also got the pretty distinct impression it was all his wife's. From the beginning I guessed that his "Executive Coordinator" title was pretty meaningless; Samantha, on the other hand, was a VP, although I get the impression that might have been pretty meaningless too. They both worked at the same company, Splash, and I have an inkling that he probably got the job because of her. Considering where her father lives, I'm guessing she didn't exactly come from humble beginnings, either. Their marriage was always a recipe for disaster.

Apparently the two of them slept in separate bedrooms. The room I judge to be Elroy's is small and depressing. The abstract pieces hanging on the wall look like generic commercial art. The furniture is modern, expensive, sterile and depressing. This room is devoid of all individuality and gives no sense of personal occupancy, like a hotel room. If it wasn't for a few shirts that I recognize as Elroy's lying around and some toiletries in the attached bathroom, I'd have assumed this was a guest room.

Samantha's room, on the other hand, is unmistakably hers. Furniture is a mixture of antique and modern, thrown together in a mishmashed way that's probably trendy. There are some mediocre black and white photographs of the Hawthorne Bridge displayed prominently on one wall. They look like

amateur work; she probably took them herself.

For how much money she spent on the décor, the room itself is a mess. Dirty clothes and undergarments are scattered everywhere, the bed is sloppily made, and there's a baggie of pot and a pipe lying conspicuously on the nightstand. The air has a distinctive aroma of feminine dominance: a thick, cloying scent of perfume mixed with dirty laundry that makes me feel like I'm in the marked territory of a wild animal. I take a moment to thank the White Christian God that I never bothered to try and lose my virginity; I can't even imagine what it must be like to live in the dominion of one of these creatures. No wonder Elroy drank like a fish.

There's a laptop sitting on the nightstand next to the drug paraphernalia. I open the back of it to see if I can remove the hard drive, but it looks like someone else beat me to the punch there. Pity. However, I manage to find something I'm fairly certain the investigators missed, something that might prove more valuable than whatever's on the laptop.

On a hunch I examine a heavy antique wardrobe. The doors are hanging open and all the interior contents have been pulled out and tossed around the room, but apparently nobody thought to look behind it. I do, and my reward is a little black notebook wedged in between the wardrobe and the wall.

I dig it out and skim through the pages. Looks like a diary, and there's entries going back as far as 2020. The last entry was apparently made on the day she died. Jackpot. The cops are going to be sorry they missed this; if you're living in the digital age and want to record anything secret, you can't beat good old fashioned pen and paper. On a hunch I pull the wardrobe all the way out and fish around. Sure enough, another notebook, this one completely full of entries dating from early 2017 up until the time the first one starts. Looks like Elroy's wife was a compulsive journal keeper.

I sift around some more but don't find any others. I'm sure she's got more but they could be anywhere in this place, but anyway it's probably about time to make like a tree and get out of here. I tuck the two journals into the pocket of my trench coat and head out the front door.

Chapter 18

April 17, 2023. 10:01 PM.

Samantha's journals end up being pretty fascinating reading. They're about as dense as *The Silmarillion* and are only slightly better written than a Harry Potter™ novel, but the information inside is more than worth the time it takes to slog my way through them.

The notebooks are more like confessionals than journals, or maybe you could call them that if Samantha seemed to be in any way ashamed of herself. She'd been married before, I learn, in fact she was married when she met Elroy. She had an established pattern of falling in love until she managed to land the object of her affection, and then she would get bored and start looking around for the next one, and screwing every stranger she bumped into in between.

She describes her many debaucheries in nauseating detail. Nearly every entry is an exhaustively detailed account of trips to various bars and nightclubs and live music venues, of drinks imbibed and illicit substances consumed, of random encounters with random strangers and the various fluids and foreign objects that went into and came out of her body as a result. It's enough to convince any reasonable guy to swear off 3DPD and stick to poners or anime waifus for the rest of his life, if he hasn't had the sense to do that already.

None of this is news, of course; Elroy had already told me more about his wife's bawdy exploits than I had any interest in knowing. I suspect if I'd found any of her earlier journals it would have just been more of the same. Either she thought she was being clever at hiding it or she didn't care, but in any case Elroy knew and if it bothered him, it wasn't enough to make him leave her, let alone kill her.

The more I read, the easier it is to put the pieces of their ill-fated romance together. It wasn't that complex a puzzle in the first place; it really just confirms what I'd already suspected. Samantha was a spoiled nympho, Elroy was a directionless wanderer from humble stock. In an ill-advised and probably halfhearted attempt to “find himself” he'd enrolled in one of the few colleges in the country still willing to admit white males with no pedigree. He apparently majored in Electronic Music Production or something similarly ridiculous, and for all I know wound up with a degree in it. She'd been married when they met, but she convinced him that it was nearly over, just like she'd pathologically done to every other guy she met.

They fell madly in love, something they apparently both believed for a while, and married almost as soon as she was divorced from her first husband. After college, she'd been given a titular role as VP in a startup company her friend was involved in called Splash. Despite having read through two journals covering about six years of her life, I'm still no closer to finding out what her company does or

precisely what anyone's role in it is, despite the fact that she apparently oversees quite a bit of its operation. Whatever it does it must at least make some money, because she managed to snag a do-nothing job for her husband as well. As far as I can tell, though, the couple mostly lived off a generous stipend from her father.

As soon as they were settled into their new life, she predictably lost interest in Elroy and began screwing around again. He's mentioned only briefly (and seldom positively) after this, but I can figure out the rest of it from having known him. I don't particularly admire him for sticking around, but in a way I can understand why he did. She might have cheated on him and treated him like garbage, but as long as he stayed married to Samantha, he could drift on a near-limitless supply of her father's cash and drown his troubles in as much free booze as his slowly pickling liver could handle.

It wasn't exactly a one-sided deal, either. It seems Reginald had long since given up on trying to steer his daughter's life back onto the straight and narrow, but apparently the one concession she'd been forced to make to his stodgy traditionalism was an agreement to see her second marriage through. If she got divorced again, she was cut off, and although she devotes many a precious page of her notebooks to complaining about the unfairness of it all, she never seems quite upset enough to reject his financial support and strike off on her own.

I close the journal and toss it onto the coffee table, next to my laptop and a crumpled ten dollar bill. I rub my temples, thinking it all over. There might be a motive for murder in here somewhere, I suppose. Elroy might have had some sort of inheritance coming to him if she were out of the way, but somehow I doubt it. The truth is, no matter how extravagantly they were able to live, neither of them owned much of anything. The money was all her Dad's, as was the penthouse and a large portion of the company, and I suspect if Samantha were no longer among the living the tap would be shut off, especially if foul play were suspected. If anything it was in his interest to keep her alive and married to him for as long as possible. Besides, even a souse like Elroy would have had the sense to realize he'd be the most likely suspect if his rich, slutty wife suddenly turned up dead. A crime of passion seems a little more plausible, although it doesn't seem like there was much she could have done at this point that would shock him enough to provoke it.

No, the more I look at this, the less I believe that Elroy had anything to do with Samantha's death. Still though, if not him, then who?

A couple of things in here jump out at me. First off, I notice that she refers to all the beaus in her life by their initials: CS for the first husband, KC for the guy she cheated with, ET for Elroy Tennbox (whom she cheated with after KC got boring), and so forth. The initials SM and BP appear briefly in an entry from about six months ago, and SM pops up a lot again after that. I suppose it could

be a coincidence, but considering the passage's many references to “big black veiny cocks,” I'm guessing the initials stand for Smoov Macadamia and Bigg Piney.

Second, she repeatedly references something called “The Sunset.” The way she describes it, it sounds like she's talking about a location rather than an actual sunset. A quick Google™ search confirms my suspicion: there is a place on SE Powell called The Sunset Motel, in the general vicinity of where the papers say she was murdered.

I close my laptop. Flutterbutts has snuggled up next to me and I put arm around her, absent mindedly running my fingers through her non-existent mane. I have a nagging feeling I might be digging up something big and ugly, something it might be better to just leave alone.

“Your bruise is swelling up.”

I look down and see Flutterbutts eyeing my face with concern. The places where Tyrone and his boyz worked me over begin to ache the second I remember it happened. Rainbow Darsh materializes, hovering in the air next to the couch.

“Are you going to let those <troubled urban youth> get away with that?” she demands.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask. She just floats there, scowling and grinding her teeth.

“M-maybe you should just leave it alone,” says Flutterbutts. I can feel her trembling; she's getting agitated. “You haven't taken any of that filthy bourgeois money yet. Why don't we just call this off while we can?”

I think about Elroy, that look of desperation on his face when he got into my car that night. I think about those two cops. I hear Tyrone's laughter echoing in my head. I grind my teeth in time with Rainbow Darsh.

Chapter 19

April 18, 2023. 11:31 AM.

Over Flutterbutts' objections I get up early the next morning and drive out to SE Powell. The Sunset Motel is a good ways west of 82nd ave, not far from a gigantic homeless tent city that used to be called Powell Butte Park. It doesn't look like the kind of motel where people stay for very long. I park at an Asian grocery across the street and head in closer on foot.

The place looks like it's still open, and the crime scene tape blatantly covering the door to one of the rooms doesn't seem to have hurt business much. I head to the little office at the far corner where a neon "Vacancy" sign glows in the window. A little bell rings when I pull the door open, and a cat scurries out of the way as I step inside.

The lobby looks about how I'd expect: a couple of 40 year old couches covered in cat hair and some tacky, water-damaged commercial art prints hanging on the walls. At the front desk sits a man of about my age and probably three times my girth, wearing an enormous black T-shirt and a rather tasteful fedora. A laptop sits open on the counter in front of him, and I immediately notice that he is watching the 2017 anime series *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon*, designated Problematic for reasons of Cultural Insensitivity and Inappropriate Portrayal of Females within two weeks of its US debut and removed from Amazon-Netflix™.

"Need a room?" he asks gruffly, taking an onion ring from a box next to the laptop and dunking it into a vat of ranch nearby.

"Actually, I'm trying to find someone," I say. "Name is Samantha. I've been trying to get hold of her for the last few days, but she hasn't been answering her phone. She stays here a lot, I was wondering if you'd seen her."

The guy gives me a long, dull look, as if he's wondering whether or not to take me seriously. Then, he shrugs indifferently and points a pudgy finger at the window, toward the door with the yellow crime scene tape outside.

"You just missed her," he says dryly.

I look out the window at where he's pointing and feign shock.

"Wait a minute, do you mean...I'd read in the news there was a murder here, but I never would have thought..."

Apparently I'm not a very good actor. The guy rolls his eyes and gives me a disgusted look.

"Listen, faggot. You're like the fourth fucking person to come down here today trying to get into the murder room. I'll tell you what I fucking tell everyone else: it's a crime scene. They have it

taped off. Nobody can go in there until they're done investigating. Not even me.”

I shoot him a glare.

“What are you accusing me of? I was just looking for a friend.”

He rolls his eyes again.

“Yeah, well, you're not the first 'friend' of Samantha's to come around looking for her recently. And in any case, she won't be seeing any more 'friends' here, not now, not ever. Do you want a fucking room or not? Because if not, I'm going to have to ask you to kindly get the fuck out of here. I'm trying to watch this.”

“Is this how you talk to customers? Maybe I should have a chat with the manager.”

“I am the manager.”

“The owner then.”

“The owner's my fucking Dad. He's 71 fucking years old and fucking senile; he doesn't even know what fucking year it is. I'm as high up on the chain of command as you're going to get. Now, do you want a fucking room or do you want to get the fuck out of here?”

I can see my current approach isn't working, and decide to try a different angle. I gesture to the laptop screen.

“Which girl do you like?”

He looks at me for a second like he thinks I'm asking about something else, then he glances abruptly at the laptop.

“They're fucking dragons.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Ilulu,” he says after a moment. “Kanna, too.”

Rainbow Darsh materializes next to me.

“Oh god, here we go,” she groans.

I nod approvingly.

“Kanna is pretty damn kawaii.”

“Kanna is fucking kawaii as fuck.”

“Fucking lolicons, the both of you,” Darsh mumbles.

I ignore her and tip my fedora. He tips his fedora. Several seconds of awkward silence follows.

“That a Goorin Brothers?”

“Stetson.”

I give a low whistle.

“A man of culture, I see. Motel business must be pretty good.”

He shrugs.

“I do all right. We appeal to a pretty..uh...niche market here, but it's pretty fucking profitable.”

He tips his fedora again. I tip mine. Rainbow Darsh rolls her eyes, and vanishes.

“I really do just want to take a quick look at that room,” I admit finally. “I mean, how often do you get to see a real murder scene? Just let me in and out real quick. Five minutes, I swear.”

He sighs.

“Look,” he says. “To tell you the truth, I really don't fucking care all that much, and you seem like an okay guy. I can't let you in there, though; it's a crime scene. The cops were pretty fucking clear on that, I'm pretty sure I could get fined or fucking charged with something. Just come back in a couple of days, when they have it all cleaned up.”

I'm about to try and see if I can work a little more charm on him, when suddenly I hear the little bell ring and turn my head to see a familiar pair of figures entering the lobby.

“Hey, there, if it isn't our old friend Tips Fedora,” says Officer Dayley.

He places himself squarely in front of me, and Officer Collins stands to the side, trapping me in the corner between the wall and the front desk.

“Something I can do for you officers?” I ask.

Collins scowls.

“What are you doing here?” he demands rudely.

I shrug.

“Figured I've earned myself a nice weekend getaway, and this place comes pretty highly recommended. Yelp™ reviews are pretty good.”

“Don't get cute.”

Collins gives me his best angry cop glare. Dayley leans uncomfortably close and puts a vice grip on my shoulder.

“Any particular reason you chose this place?” asks Dayley. “Seems like an awfully big coincidence. Almost like you're returning to the scene of the crime, so to speak.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Dayley chuckles. Collins scowls.

“Naw, you ain't under arrest, Mr. Fedora. Unless you've got something you want to confess to.”

“I'm good.”

The two of them stand there, staring me down. I don't blink. After a few seconds Dayley lets go of my shoulder and moves casually out of my path.

“We'll let you be on your way, then,” he says. As I push on the door, he calls out. “We'll be

seeing you again, Mr. Fedora.”

Chapter 20

April 18, 2023. 6:08 PM.

The motel had been my only lead, and it doesn't look like I'll be getting anywhere near it without risking more than it's probably worth. Without anything better to do, I decide to spend the rest of the day driving fares and thinking. I've been turning the case over and over in my head for hours, but I keep going in circles. Eventually I shut off the app and head home.

I plop down on the couch and grab my laptop. Rainbow Darsh has been floating around my head, giving me shit about *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon* all day, so I put it on the TV to annoy her. I skim through my emails for the day. Most of it is the usual stuff, then suddenly I notice a strange one. The username is a long string of random characters, the domain I recognize as an anonymous email service popular on the Dark Web. Subject line is empty.

I open the message. It isn't signed, but I know instantly who it's from.

Tips, it reads. *Thanks for the other night. I'm sorry about all this, you deserve an explanation.*

Elroy goes on to explain how he'd gotten an anonymous text message from a blocked number the night I drove him to Vancouver. The message informed him that his wife had been murdered, and he was going to be framed for it. Any belief that it might be a prank was dispelled by a series of gory photographs attached to the message. He included the images in the email in case I didn't believe him. He'd naturally been drunk off his ass when he got the message, but he'd had enough presence of mind to pack a duffel bag and call me. The rest of the story I knew.

He ends the message by telling me he's in China, and he should be safe there because they don't have extradition treaties and blah blah blah; he seems a lot more confident about his situation than I am. He asks me not to look for him and to delete the message as soon as I've read it. Another apology, this time for any trouble I might have had with the police on his account. The bruises on my face throb momentarily when I read that, but in the end I decide not to hold it against him; all things considered he's probably been having a rougher time than I have.

As per his instructions, I delete the message, although I'm sure if the cops were interested enough to bug my inbox they probably have a copy already. At least he had the sense to use an untraceable account and to not sign his name. The images I save to an encrypted container on my hard drive.

The pictures are pretty nasty, and they don't look fake. The woman is clearly Samantha, but whoever did this really did a number on her. The background looks like a typical cheap motel, which suggests my hunch about the Sunset was probably right. I zoom in close on the images, going over the

details in the background with a fine toothed comb, but I don't find anything terribly interesting. On the nightstand is a pack of Marlboro Mild™, and according to Elroy Samantha didn't smoke (cigarettes), so I can assume that my suspect probably smokes this brand. Other than that, it's just a bunch of shots of a motel bed with a bloody mess on it. Not much, but it's something to go on, I guess.

Later that night my phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize, and when I pick up, Reginald Vel Johnson asks me for a status report on the case. I tell him I'm looking into it, but I don't mention the email from Elroy. A couple hours later it rings again, a different number that I also don't recognize. When I answer, I get about ten seconds of heavy breathing followed by a click.

Chapter 21

April 20, 2023. 3:19 PM.

The last two days have been uneventful. I spent one of them driving, the other one at home wasting time on the internet and pretending to investigate the case. I haven't heard from Reginald since the other night when he called.

I've got a few tabs open that I'm periodically cycling through, while Flutterbutts nuzzles her head in my lap and Rainbow Darsh floats restlessly around the room. One tab is an up to the minute local news feed, which I've scripted to filter articles related to the Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson murder. The tab icon blinks, indicating that it's got an update for me. When I read the headline, I'm so stunned that my little ponies(TM) suddenly vanish and the computer screen captures my full attention.

Elroy R. Tennbox, whom the papers repeatedly mention as the prime suspect in the case, had been tracked by international investigators to a hotel room in Hong Kong. After a brief standoff with local police, in which a plainly inebriated Tennbox had claimed to have a hostage in the room, police had broken down the door to discover him alone, and dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Part of me had been afraid of an outcome like this the whole time, I realize; anticipating it even.

A powerful wave of sadness hits me all of a sudden, almost hard enough to knock me unconscious. I hadn't known Elroy that long or that well, but he'd been a friend. I don't have too many of those, not counting incorporeal ones at least, and I'd liked him. He had his faults, but he didn't deserve this, not by a long shot. Flutterbutts materializes and nuzzles her head against my chest, but it feels like a hollow reaction somehow, almost disrespectful, and she immediately vanishes again as soon as I realize it. All the bleak unfairness in this cold, godless world washes over me in a single moment, threatens to drown me. Then, just like that, the wave subsides, and that familiar feeling of emotional detachment returns, albeit with a little more emptiness than before.

In about an hour, I get a phone call from Vel Johnson's lawyer, informing me that the case has been closed and I'm no longer considered a person of interest. She offers some empty condolences for Elroy, I offer some empty gratitude in return. None of it is any more or any less than I'd expect. I thank her for her efforts on my behalf, and she disconnects.

Not long afterwards, I get a knock on the door. I'm half expecting to see Tyrone and his friends waiting with baseball bats when I look through the peephole, but it turns out to only be a solitary white guy in an expensive suit carrying an envelope full of money. Pity; I was in the mood to get my ass kicked. He hands me the envelope, and tells me it's from Reginald as "payment for services rendered." I tell him that I haven't rendered any services and I haven't earned payment for anything, but he won't

take no for an answer. Finally I take pity on him, and let him leave the envelope with me so he can go back to his boss and tell him that he did his job.

I open it up, and just as I suspected, it's stuffed with hundred dollar bills, totaling to \$11,000 even. Since I've got nothing better to do, I call up Reginald and get his grumpy butler-bodyguard instead. After bandying words pointlessly with him for about ten minutes, I finally convince him to put the man himself on the phone, and proceed to have an equally pointless conversation where I try to convince Reginald that I didn't do any actual work and I don't want his money. Not surprisingly, he won't hear of it, and after we exchange some empty condolences he hangs up, leaving me eleven grand richer and even angrier than I was before I called.

I pace around my apartment, filled with pointless rage at anything and everything. I just got handed the biggest paycheck of my life for the first detective job I've ever had, and I don't even want it. I didn't earn it. I couldn't help Elroy, I couldn't help Reginald, I couldn't do anything. I feel like a chump. Worse than a chump, even; I feel like a charity case. Like I just got handed the world's biggest participation trophy.

Rainbow Darsh floats aimlessly about the room, bucking her imaginary hooves at the walls and snorting. Flutterbutts knows to stay out of our way when we're like this, but I can see her huddled in the corner, sniffing every now and then, and I feel absurdly sad about it. I need to get out of here.

Fuck it. I open the envelope and grab a few bills, then stash the rest under my bed. I throw on my coat and hat and stuff the money into one of the inside pockets, and head out the door.

Chapter 22

April 21, 2023. 12:11 PM.

I roll out of bed groggy and disoriented. My head feels like a watermelon after a Gallagher show. How the hell do I even know who Gallagher was? His act was designated Problematic way back in October of 2006, when when a group of Harvard™ students decided to interpret his watermelon-smashing routine as some kind of racial antagonism against black people. He made a public apology but it wasn't enough; he lost all his money and was never heard from again. I was like fucking nine when that happened, how in the world do I even remember that?

It hurts to open my eyes, but it hurts just as much when I close them again. It's pretty clear that I won't be getting back to sleep any time soon, but I don't want to move or get out of bed. Eventually dehydration drags me out, and I manage to stumble over to the kitchen sink. I turn on the tap and guzzle the stream directly out of the spout until I have to breathe, then I fill the nearest cup to the brim and chug it all in one gulp. I grimace. Probably should have chosen a cup that wasn't already half-full of soapy dishwater.

I feel like I got hit by a train. I have no idea how Elroy managed to do this to himself every night. I've still got an economy-sized jug of Tylenol™ tablets in the bathroom, so I down a couple and chug another glass of water. Because I'm a masochist, I read the warning on the side of the bottle about liver damage, then do my best to forget about it.

On the kitchen counter next to the stove is a big five liter box of Peter Vella Chardonnay™. A picture of Mr. Vella is plastered on the front of the box, sitting in his vineyard in Tuscany or wherever, holding up a glass of his shitty wine and smiling like it's the classiest thing he's ever tasted. I'll be perfectly honest; I probably couldn't taste the difference between a world-class chardonnay and a jug of Kool Aid™ mixed with vodka, but I know a con when I see one. I remember this smug cocksucker smiling at me from the shelf at the Wal Mart™, as if daring me to try his chardonnay and tell him that it wasn't the best thing I'd ever tasted. Five whole liters of the greatest wine ever made, and it could be all mine in exchange for twelve measly dollars. If I hadn't been drunk already when I bought it, I like to think that I wouldn't have fallen for it. But then again, who knows.

Fuck you, Peter Vella™. I'm never trusting you again.

Rainbow Darsh materializes and bucks Peter right in his stupid face, and it would have been immensely satisfying to see him go flying across the room, but naturally he stays right where he is, smiling that irritating smile, frozen in time for all eternity in his probably non-existent Tuscan villa, holding up his dumb little glass of god-awful chardonnay. I sigh, rinse out my cup, and twist the

spigot. Hair of the dog, I guess.

The wine is just as shitty as I remember it being, but it turns out the mantra about the dog is true enough. Between the wine and the Tylenol the hangover downgrades from a catastrophic train wreck to the kind that just irritates you because it's holding up traffic, and eventually I feel like I can function again. I look down at my cup and see that it's still about half full, but the prospect of downing any more of this swill suddenly disgusts me, so I dump the rest of it down the drain, open the refrigerator, and swap the box for a two liter of Mountain Dew™.

Last night was a disgrace, and I'm disgusted with myself. It started with a trip to the old comfy place that Elroy and I had gone to on Fridays. I figured I'd have a Reuben sandwich and maybe a beer or two in his honor and go home. A beer or two turned into about four of them, and I was staggering by the time I left.

However I hadn't felt satisfied, so I'd gone off to another bar, one where the staff didn't know me and I could get roaring drunk without feeling like everyone was watching me and clucking their tongues in disappointment. So I picked the trendiest, hipsterest place I could find, a bar where as soon as I walked in the door I immediately realized I felt nothing but contempt for literally every single person inside, and that most of them probably felt nothing but pity for me. But that was way too public an environment for me, so after finishing about half of a single nine dollar gimlet I headed to Wal Mart, and spent the rest of the evening in my apartment, just me and the poners and that cocksucker Peter Vella™.

I put some anime on the TV but I'm still too agitated to really pay much attention to it. My mind keeps drifting back to the case, then I remember that there is no case, that there never really was one in the first place, and I go back to being agitated. I drum my fingers on the couch. I open my laptop and surf mindlessly. I close it and set it down on the coffee table. I drum my fingers on the couch some more. I reach out and pick up the laptop again, and something falls to the floor. It's a crumpled up ten dollar bill that's been sitting there since time out of mind, that for whatever reason never seems to find its way into my wallet. I stare down at Hamilton's face, looking forlornly up at me from the filthy carpet, and I pick him up, smooth him out, and return him to his place on the coffee table.

I've still got the news feed scripted to deliver articles about the Hartwell-Vel Johnson murder, and it looks like there's been a couple more of them published since the news about Elroy broke yesterday. I skim the articles but there's no new information, and I'm guessing the subject will be dead in a couple of days. Still, there's something about all this that bothers me, something that doesn't quite sit right. I can't quite figure out what it is, though, and it makes me mad.

I decide to do a little sleuthing, to pass the time if nothing else. There's a repository on the Dark Web that maintains a fairly up to date archive of internal police reports from various municipalities all over the world. An incident like Elroy's suicide isn't likely to be classified, so I imagine the report should be pretty easy to find by now. A quick search proves that I'm right about this, and soon I've got a copy of an incident report filed by the Hong Kong police, dated 4/17/23.

I read through the document. The details pretty much match what the news has reported already, but I go over it again anyway. At approximately 9:00 PM, police set up a perimeter around the hotel where suspect Elroy R. Tennbox was believed to be in hiding. A shot had been fired from one of the second story windows, followed by suspect Tennbox appearing at the window, shouting that he had a woman in the room and he would kill her if anyone tried to enter. Suspect appeared to be heavily intoxicated.

After a brief standoff, Sgt. John Chao, ranking officer in charge of negotiations, determined that there was no hostage and ordered officers to head inside the building and storm the suspect's room. Officers broke down the door at 9:17, and discovered the suspect lying on the floor in a pool of blood, with an exit wound in his skull and a .38 revolver lying nearby. Suspect was confirmed to be deceased and the death was determined to be a suicide.

Again, this was all old news to me at this point. There was something about it that was triggering alarm bells in my skull though, but I couldn't quite get a grip on what it was.

“When did this happen?” asks Flutterbutts, who had appeared on the couch next to me and was reading the report over my shoulder.

I look at the date on the report and it hits me. 4/17/23. This happened four days ago. The story just broke yesterday, but this report is dated the 17th. I open my email and scroll down to the message that Elroy sent me. It was timestamped on 4/18/23, at 5:06 PM.

By the time Elroy sent me this message, he'd already been dead for almost 24 hours.

Chapter 23

April 21, 2023. 2:16 PM.

Rain patters against my windshield. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of the speakers. *Icarus* by Paul Winter and the Winter Consort, released in 1972 and re-issued in 1978. Designated Problematic in March of 2019 for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™. I do not own an original copy of this record.

I'm not working. I'd probably be a little too irritable right now to handle passengers, and my luck I'd get nothing but talkers. Driving helps me think, though, so I tool aimlessly around, wasting gas and listening to music.

I turn the case over in my mind. Officially there is no case, but since I was never officially a detective anyway I decide that no one can reasonably object if I reopen it. There's only two possible explanations for why the time stamps don't add up. The first is that someone faked the email, something which is easy to do, but I can't imagine who would want to or why. The second is that Elroy's suicide was faked somehow, or that it never even happened in the first place and the report had been planted. Here the problem is inverted: I can think of plenty of people with a motive to do that, but it would require a lot of clout to be able to pull it off. Whoever did it would need to have a pretty broad reach, extending at least into the Hong Kong police department for starters.

Occam's Razor states that the simplest explanation is always the most likely, so I start with that. Someone pretending to be Elroy sent me a message, telling me that he was fine and that I shouldn't look for him. Who, and why?

So far, I only know a few parties who have an interest in the case. Tyrone told me pretty explicitly that he didn't want me looking for Elroy. This kind of elaborate cloak and dagger doesn't seem like his style, though. Guys like him usually start with a beatdown and a warning, and if that doesn't work the next step is a bullet in the head. I shouldn't rule him out, but I don't think it's likely.

Reginald Vel Johnson is the other probable suspect, but that makes even less sense. He hired me to look for Elroy. Unless he just really wanted to piss away eleven grand, I can't imagine why he would hire me and then deliberately try to throw me off the scent.

So nobody I know so far is likely to have sent me a fake message. If I assume the message was real then, it means Elroy is still alive and in hiding somewhere. It also means that someone went to a lot of trouble to make it look like he was in a police standoff and killed himself. It makes perfect sense if he was being framed; whoever set it up had a real motivation to get the case closed as quickly as possible. Elroy would have complicated things by running away and turning it into a manhunt. The

longer the case was open the greater the chance of the real killer being exposed. If Elroy dies and there's no other suspects, the whole case wraps up in a neat little package that can be buried and forgotten.

The more I mull it over, the more I think the second explanation is the more likely one. Someone murdered Samantha, framed Elroy, and wants the matter closed. My next objective should be trying to figure out who that person is.

I've been driving for a while now, and I realize I'm fairly close to the Sunset Motel. Since officially speaking the investigation is over, I can't imagine those two cops are still hanging around, unless they're there for the same reason everyone else usually is. Maybe it's time to take another run at the place.

Chapter 24

April 21, 2023. 3:11 PM.

The same guy, wearing the same fedora and a different oversized T-shirt, looks up from his laptop when the little bell over the door rings. I'm sure he recognizes me, but his expression doesn't change as I approach the little counter.

“Need a room?” he asks.

“Yeah, I was wondering if 117 was available,” I say. I'd glanced at the number of the taped off door while I was leaving the other day.

The guy looks mildly irritated.

“It's occupied,” he says.

I reach into the pocket of my trench coat. Painting the town red last night only cost me about forty bucks, so the stack of cash I grabbed is still pretty much intact. I peel a bill out and slide it across the counter.

“I've got a portrait of Benjamin Franklin that says it isn't.”

He looks at me with a bemused expression.

“Good looking guy. Got any more pictures of him?”

I irritatedly slide another two bills across the counter.

“Keep going...” he says.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Three hundred is plenty. Now open the damn door before I call up Dayley and Collins and tell them what you've got on your laptop.”

That was a complete shot in the dark, of course. I have no idea what's on this guy's laptop. From the look on his face when I mention it, though, I hope I never find out. He pales visibly, then quickly stands up and grabs the key off the wall in the back.

“Their cleaning crew just got done with it,” he mutters as he waddles across the lobby with the key in his hand. “I haven't been in there yet, though. I have no idea what condition the room is in.”

“Perfect,” I say, and follow him out into the parking lot.

He leads me across the lot and opens the door to room 117. It's a perfectly ordinary dingy motel room, still in a state of dishevelment, and the smell that hits us as soon as we open the door is noxious; a heavy mixture of cleaning chemicals with an undertone of something a lot less pleasant.

“Whew!” he coughs as he walks in and immediately slides open the window. “I should probably air this out a little.”

“You should probably have done that as soon as the cops were finished with it,” I say mildly, and begin looking around.

My corpulent friend's laziness works to my advantage, though. Except for the bed, which has been stripped of its sheets and still has a conspicuous brownish stain on the mattress that even the heaviest cleaning chemicals don't seem to have been able to remove, the room looks like it's still in more or less the same state as it was when the murder happened. The pack of cigarettes on the nightstand is gone, no doubt taken and entered into evidence somewhere, but there's still a few butts left in the ashtray. I pick one up and examine it. There's a lipstick mark on the filter; it could be from Samantha or it could be from any one of the women who check in and out of this room every few hours.

“Does anyone else besides you work here?” I ask.

The guy shrugs.

“Not really. I've got a Mexican lady who cleans the rooms and that's about it.”

“So you were here the night this happened?”

He seems to get what I'm angling at and hesitates.

“Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Depends on how fucking badly you want to know.”

I sigh and reach into my pocket. I've still got about six hundred dollars, so I pull it out and wave it under his nose.

“Look, I don't have time to dance around with you, even if you look like you could use the exercise. Tell me everything you know about what happened here and I'll leave this money and never bother you again. Get any greedier and I really *will* call Collins and Dayley. Deal?”

“Deal.” He snatches the money out of my hands and stuffs it into his own pocket.

He waddles over to the bed and looks curiously at the stain.

“Alright, walk me through it,” I say.

He looks up from the mattress and clears his throat.

“Okay, so Samantha checks in around nine o'clock, asks for her usual room.”

“She's in here a lot?”

“Yeah...” He hesitates.

“Look,” I say, “It's no secret what kind of business goes on here and I don't care what your part in it is. I'm not going to tell anyone. All I care about is getting the answers that I paid for. Only way you have a problem is if I don't.”

“Alright,” he agrees. “So, Samantha checks in. She's got her fucking pimp with her, tall black guy, looks like he stepped right out of a fucking Dolomite movie.”

“Smooov Macadamia?”

“Yeah, that's him. He never comes along unless the job is really fucking important, so I knew something special was going to happen. Anyway, she checks in and goes to her room. The guy slips me a few bills and tells me he's got some important people dropping by later, make sure no one disturbs them.”

“Who was it?”

“I didn't get a look at all of them. A big fucking limo shows up and drops off a whole crowd, like maybe five or six guys, and they all go into this room. Only one I saw clearly was Malcolm Crowley.”

I can't prevent surprise from showing on my face.

“Malcolm Crowley? The Governor of Oregon?”

“Yeah, that's him.”

“I thought he was gay.”

Tubby smirks.

“Nope,” he says. “Straight as the crow flies. He's in here a lot, actually.”

“Isn't he married to some guy though?”

“It's a fucking act, it's just for the voters. Truth is, he's a fucking misogynist pig, and from what I hear, kind of a sadist too. Like I said, he comes in a lot. He's into some really weird shit. Violent shit.” He nods toward the bedspread. “I wouldn't be half fucking surprised if he had a lot to do with whatever this was.”

I remember the pictures of Samantha that had been emailed to me. Her face had looked like someone worked it over with a pipe or something. The damage to the rest of her body wasn't exactly pleasant either. Real vicious, whoever did that. Could that smiling prick from those ads proclaiming “a bright future for Oregon” that run every two years be responsible for that kind of damage to another human being? It makes my blood boil to think about it. Sure, Samantha was a filthy whore, both literally and figuratively, but nobody deserves that kind of treatment.

“Alright,” I say, “So Governor Crowley and some other guys show up and go into the room. What happens next?”

“Well,” he continues, “Like I said, they all fucking go in there, and they're all fucking partying or whatever they were doing. I'm not really paying much attention, I was just in the office. About an hour later, that same limo pulls up again, and all of those guys come running out of that room like

they'd just pulled a bank job. I thought it was a little weird at the time, but I didn't really think much of it.”

“You go into the room?”

“Naw, it was that Samantha chick's name on the register. I can't go in there until she fucking checks out. Even I got rules I gotta play by. But anyway, at the time I didn't really think that much of it, I just figured the party was over. Then, a little after they all leave, this big black Escalade™ pulls up, and this guy gets out and goes into the room.”

“Get a look at him?”

“Naw, not really. I just figured he was another client or something, and in any case I didn't really want to get involved. If someone pays me to stay out of something, I stay out of it. Anyway, he's in there about like fifteen minutes, then he leaves. The room's fucking quiet after that, I didn't see anyone else coming in or going out. Then a little later the fucking cops show up, said someone called and reported a murder in one of the rooms.”

“Did you tell them any of this?”

“Fuck no, I don't talk to cops!” He looked offended that I would even suggest it. “They just asked the usual bullshit, where I was, did I see anything, all that. I told them she checked in, went to her room, and I wasn't paying attention after that.”

I nod.

“Alright, thanks.”

Chapter 25

April 21, 2023. 3:43 PM.

I drive away, thinking over what the fat weeaboo just told me. The mellow sounds of Paul Winter's soprano saxophone fill my car as I brood.

So the flaming-gay Governor of Oregon is really a closet straight guy with a mean streak. He hires a prostitute for a gang bang with some friends, shit gets out of control, she dies, he orchestrates a frame-up of the girl's husband to cover his ass. It all basically makes sense, plenty of sense actually. The plan seems a little over-elaborate; it might be easier to just make the body disappear rather than go to all the trouble of framing someone. Still, Samantha wasn't just some random whore, she was a VP of a local company and the daughter of someone rich and presumably powerful. Maybe it wasn't that simple.

That makes me wonder just what Samantha was doing there in the first place. From what the motel manager told me, it's pretty obvious this wasn't a one-time thing for her. From what I read in her journal, it seemed like she knew Smoov Macadamia and Bigg Piney. In the Biblical sense, even.

By that logic, one could presume that Macadamia had been her pimp. Why, though? She certainly didn't need the money, which as I understand it is why most girls end up choosing "the life." What wacky chain of circumstances could have possibly led to her being in that motel room in the first place? The deeper I go, the more I find myself wondering just what the hell it is I'm digging up and just why the hell I'm even still digging.

I'm feeling pretty hungry, so I stop and pick up a pizza on my way home. At the door to my apartment, I awkwardly fumble to get the keys out of my pocket while holding the pizza with one hand, only to discover that the door was unlocked. That's odd. I always lock the door whenever I go anywhere; my collection of plastic revolving music discs is far too valuable and illegal to risk exposing to wandering brigands.

I'm instantly on guard, and push the door open slowly. I scan the inside of the apartment but I don't see anyone. Cautiously, I advance into the main room. I look into the kitchen; all clear. There's nowhere to hide in there anyway. I move a little further in.

The main room seems entirely clear. I peer behind the sofa and don't see anyone. Maybe I was just being paranoid. I probably just forgot to lock the door, I was still a little hung over when I left after all. I head to the wall shelves to check on my music collection, but so far everything in here looks intact--

"Surprise, motherfucker."

I wheel around to see a huge black guy barreling towards me out of the sleeping nook.

“Look out!” Helpful as ever, Rainbow Darsh materializes and warns me of impending doom.

His fist comes flying towards me at rocket speed. I raise my hands to protect my face, forgetting that they are still holding the pizza. The man's fist collides with the pie, pushing it out of my hands and connecting with my jaw. The room spins. Dimly I'm aware of Rainbow Darsh spiraling wildly around in circles and Flutterbutts screaming atonally somewhere. An instant later I am on my back, staring up at the ceiling, searing hot cheese and pepperoni burning into my face.

Before I even have time to process what is happening, I am rolled over onto my stomach. I feel my hands being pulled behind my back, and I hear a familiar tearing sound that only registers as duct tape after my hands have already been secured. A second strip covers my mouth.

Finally my mind recovers from the punch well enough to react, and I begin to struggle, kicking my legs wildly at the air.

“Hold still, bitch!”

I hear a loud crack and feel a sudden sharp pain in the back of my skull. The world fades gradually into blackness.

Chapter 26

April 21, 2023. 10:37 PM.

Everything feels and smells damp. My bones ache, my clothes feel wet. For a moment, my confused brain wonders if I wet the bed, but as I slowly come to I inhale and recognize the wet, moldy smell of decaying wood, of pine tar and plants and open air. It's the smell of the forest.

I open my eyes. As the memory of the attack comes back to me, I have a moment of panic where I wonder if I've been buried alive, but as I roll over I see the moonlit sky between the overarching canopy of branches, and I realize this isn't the case. I discover with relief that my hands and feet are no longer bound, and the tape over my mouth has been removed. Groggily, I sit up, but immediately freeze when I notice Bigg Piney sitting on a folding chair nearby. He is dressed immaculately in a brightly colored silk shirt and fur-lined leather coat. A purple corduroy hat sits cocked to one side on his head, and a heavy gold chain is draped around his neck. About my only consolation right now is that his brilliant white Nikes™ appear to have been completely ruined by his trek into the woods. His enormously baggy, heavy denim pants are soaked through almost up to the knees. His eerie cheshire cat smile glows luminescent in the moonlight, and I notice that he has a large silver-plated .45 Desert Eagle trained on me.

“You awake. Bout fucking time.”

I rub my aching wrists. Judging by the stiffness of my muscles and the fact that it was afternoon the last time I remember being conscious, I'm guessing I'm a long way from home right now.

“Where am I?” I ask, my speech slurring a little more than I would like.

Bigg Piney's cheshire cat grin spreads wider.

“Does it matter?”

I stare into his yellow, filmy eyes.

“What are we doing out here?” I ask.

He doesn't say anything. I don't need him to. I know the answer before the words are even out of my mouth.

I stare at the gun in his hand for a moment, then back at his face. He gestures to his left with the gun, and I turn to see a shovel stuck into the ground nearby. I stare at it for a moment and then turn back to him, gazing expressionlessly into the yellow orbs of his eyes.

“Well?” he says.

I continue to stare blankly at him. His smile fades, and he rises to his feet.

“What you waiting for, motherfucker? I look like a nigga who wants to spend all night digging

a hole? Get moving, bitch, or Imma kill you nice and slow.”

Slowly, my bones and muscles creaking agonizingly with every movement, I pull myself to my feet and trundle towards the shovel. With dull, mechanical movements, I push it down into the ground, pull out a shovelful of dark, wet earth, and toss it to the side.

“Move, bitch. I don't wanna be here all night.”

Thousands of words rush through my brain in a torrent. Questions, provocations, insults; I say none of them. Somehow I'm incapable of speech, incapable of doing anything except methodically pushing the shovel into the earth, scooping it up, tossing the dirt to the side, pushing it in again. Flutterbutts cowers on the ground beside me, sobbing loudly. Rainbow Darsh whirls around my head, cursing everything and nothing, frothing angrily at the mouth, her bloodshot eyes darting erratically back and forth.

The hole slowly gets bigger. Dimly I'm aware of the moon moving across the sky, the thick shadows slowly changing position. A thousand fantasies play out in my mind; I imagine myself charging him with the shovel, or dropping it and barreling off through the woods, dodging bullets as I run for freedom. I imagine myself evading his shots as I lunge forward with lightning speed, his slow, ponderous bulk unable to dodge my sweet ninja moves as I rain blows down upon him. I imagine seizing his gun, imagine the satisfying feeling of firing round after round into his chest, thick crimson blood staining his immaculate silk shirt as his body convulses with the impact of each shot.

However, in the real world, nothing changes. I dig. Flutterbutts sobs. Rainbow Darsh curses and flaps her wings.

“That's far enough, motherfucker.”

I'm standing in a trench that is a good five feet deep, covered in sweat. I turn around to see Bigg Piney's rotund form outlined against the moon. The pale light glints softly off the brilliantly polished barrel, the instrument of my imminent demise bearing down upon me.

“Wait! You don't have to do this!” I finally croak out. My voice, which sounded so authoritative and commanding in my head, comes out as a comical, effeminate squeak.

Bigg Piney grins that cheshire cat smile again.

“Macadamia warned you, motherfucker. Stay the fuck out of it, that's all your bitch ass had to do.”

He aims the gun at my head. The soft cherry glow of a cigarette in his mouth floats before his face for just a moment, winking in and out like a firefly.

“Can I at least have a smoke before you kill me?” I blurt out.

Piney hesitates. The cigarette glows again, and he pulls it out of his mouth and tosses it to the

side. I hear a dull plop followed by a low sizzle as it lands in a puddle somewhere nearby.

“Yeah, alright. That's fine I guess.”

He lifts his shirt and reaches into the pocket of his jeans. His eyes are off me for just one split second, and the gun angles away from my face. One second is all I need.

With every remaining ounce of my strength, I swing the shovel as hard as I possibly can at his head, shouting some empty, doubtlessly Problematic, epithet at the top of my lungs. It isn't even close. The shovel blade whizzes by at least a foot from his face, doing no more damage than sending a gust of air into his eyes, before I lose my grip on it and it goes careening wildly off into the dark woods surrounding us. I stumble and fall forward onto my knees.

“Motherfucker!” he yells, wobbling on his feet for a second and dropping his pack of smokes. He tries to aim the gun at me, but he's off his balance, and he stumbles backward a couple of steps. His foot catches on the heavy cuff of his pants, and he wobbles even further. His arms flail wildly, and the gun goes flying. It lands with a soft thud in the hole somewhere behind me, but I can only stare in amazement as the gigantic man teeters dangerously, poised in the air for a single brief second, before toppling over backwards. I hear a wet, sickening crack as the entirety of his bulk crashes to the ground.

It takes me only a split second to recover, and I immediately wheel around and scramble through the mud, searching for the gun. I find it stuck in the mud a few feet away, and I yank it out, adrenaline surging through my body and animating my throbbing muscles as I turn around and aim it at the lip of the hole. I'm sitting in the hole, my back pressed against the far wall. I can feel the damp earth soaking into the seat of my shorts and the back of my shirt through my probably ruined trench coat. The barrel of the gun wobbles dangerously in the moonlight as I point it at the spot where I am certain that, in mere seconds, Piney will reappear. I do my best to steady myself, my heart pounding in my chest as I prepare to empty an entire clip into him the instant he reappears.

Seconds tick by. Nothing happens. Seconds turn into minutes. A small eternity ticks by as I sit there, trembling with aching arms as I hold the barrel steady, aiming at the lip of the hole, certain that the second I lower it is when he will pounce. I can hear nothing but the blood rushing in my ears and the empty stillness of the forest around us.

I wait there for I have no idea how long. Eventually, I can't take it any more, and slowly, agonizingly, I creep forward to the end of the hole and peer up over the edge. I can see Bigg Piney's heavy form, lying there like a stone on his back. I reach out slowly with the gun and tap it against his foot. It wobbles a bit but he doesn't stir.

Slowly, I clamber out of the hole. It's started raining again, and the ground falls apart in my hands as I try to grab it. An absurd terror seizes me, a thought that after all this, I won't be able to

climb out of the hole and I'll die down here anyway, slowly drowning as it fills up with rainwater, but I keep pawing at the mud like a dog stuck in a swimming pool, until eventually I manage to make a graceless escape.

I'm completely covered in mud. As raindrops begin to pound against my forehead and drip down into my eyes, I realize suddenly that I'm not wearing my fedora. I hunt around for it briefly but soon give up. I've got considerably more important things to worry about right now.

I see Rainbow Darsh standing over Bigg Piney, snarling at him triumphantly, slaver dribbling off of her chin and running in rivulets down his face, mixing in with the rain. I approach cautiously and examine him, still aiming the gun with trembling hands.

His yellow filmy eyes stare vacantly up at the night sky. His mouth hangs half open, his face frozen in a permanent expression of sheer dumb amazement, rainwater pooling in the open cavity and trickling down his chin. There's a small pool of blood seeping into the earth behind his head. When he fell backward, he had landed perfectly on a sharp rock, that had somehow managed to hit his skull in just the right spot to kill him instantly.

I begin to laugh. A little chuckle at first, but soon I'm in a fit of near hysterics, howling with laughter until I'm nearly out of breath. This has to be some sort of miracle. Maybe God loves me after all.

"I really don't think this is very funny," a small, frail voice says beside me. I turn to see Flutterbutts prodding at Piney's dead deceased corpse with a muddy hoof. "We were all nearly killed, and this poor working-class Negro *was* killed; just another pawn in the sick game of the Capitalist bourgeoisie."

Another half-chuckle, half-sob escapes me. I realize just how close I almost came to never hearing her insane Communist babble again, and I pause to give her an affectionate scratch behind the ears. Meanwhile, I bend down and fish around in the dead man's pockets. I find a money clip that makes my payment from Vel Johnson look like a delivery tip. I hold it in my hands for a moment, realizing that this is probably the first and last time I'll ever see this much money in one place, but after a moment's consideration I put it back. I could probably use it and might arguably have earned it, but as far as I'm concerned he can keep it. Nothing else is particularly worth taking; a Zippo™ lighter, a bag of soggy marijuana, one of those glass pipes the kids use to smoke it, and a ring of keys.

In the end, I leave everything else and take the keys. After a moment's consideration, I turn to the muddy hole that came very close to being my lonely grave and toss the gun into the pool of rainwater forming at the bottom. It only takes me a minute to locate the shadowy form of an enormous black Cadillac™ sedan parked a short distance away, along the side of a gravel road. The doors are all

unlocked, and the trunk is still hanging open. I search around inside, but alas there's still no sign of my fedora. It could be anywhere between here and Portland, I realize. A second later I realize that I have no idea where "here" even is, and I should probably worry more about that than where my hat is. Still, I feel a bit lost without it; like an irreplaceable part of me has been severed.

I clamber into the driver's seat, not even giving the remotest semblance of a fuck that I am tracking mud and rainwater all over Piney's pristine leather seats. I put the key in the ignition, turn it over, and...nothing.

Dead battery. The damned idiot left the headlights on.

Chapter 27

April 22, 2023. 1:14 AM.

The gravel road winds off through the trees in either direction. I have absolutely no idea which way I should go, so I take a pick and start walking. After following the twisting, weed-choked road for what felt like over an hour and finding the woods only getting denser and denser around me, I begin to suspect that I might have chosen wrong. However, on the off chance that I didn't, and absent any real desire to head back in the direction of Piney's corpse, I decide to keep going and see what I find. I found a small bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos™ and a gas station sandwich in the glove box of the Cadillac™, so at least I know I won't starve.

I keep walking, the ponies floating on either side of me looking as wet and miserable as I am. I have no idea how long I've been at it or how far I've gone. One of the first things I realized after I set out is that my phone is gone, along with my wallet and keys. Makes sense; if I was going to end up buried in the woods it would have been a pretty amateurish move for Piney to leave a GPS beacon to my grave. Taking the wallet was just a dick move though; I had nothing in there except my driver's license and my neetbux card, the balance of which wasn't even half of what that *<intelligent and beautiful person of color>* was carrying around with him in his damn pocket.

I'm wet and cold and miserable, and almost ready to turn around and head back, when suddenly I come across a wooden sign nailed to a tree. "Saskawatchee Campground." Well, shit. It might not be a road, but it's something.

I follow the gravel road into the campground, but I pass nothing but empty sites on either side. Everything looks kind of run down and dilapidated. I find one of those outdoor camp toilets and head inside. It's clean, but empty. No chemicals at the bottom of the toilet, no toilet paper, no hand soap in the dispenser. The campground is either still closed for the season, or more likely deserted. I'm guessing the second one; not too many people go camping these days, and I've heard a lot of the national parks have started cutting costs.

The abandoned camp bathroom isn't exactly the Ritz, but it's shelter from the rain, and maybe half a degree warmer than being outside. I pull the sandwich and chips out of my pocket and eat a cold, unsatisfying meal on the floor. I'm about to curl up and try to get a little sleep, when I hear the faint but unmistakable sound of someone laughing in the distance.

I pull myself to my feet, standing on tiptoe next to the little ventilation window, straining to listen. The rain has lightened up a little, and after a few moments I hear it again, more clearly this time. The unmistakable sound of a woman laughing, followed by something unintelligible in a male voice.

I take a quick piss since I'm already here, and head outside again. The gravel road so far hasn't branched off, and I didn't see anyone coming in, so it stands to reason that I'll bump into whoever it was eventually if I simply keep going.

After walking about twenty minutes, I begin to hear more clearly the sounds of humans. Quite a few of them, by the sound of it. Laughter and voices, male and female, coming from further down the road. There's a soft glow coming from that direction, indicating that they probably have a fire, and I can hear music, too. It's some sort of electronic dance music; I don't recognize the artist, but it's a welcome sound compared to the empty noises of the forest and the infernal rain drumming against my head.

I come around a bend in the road, and am immediately almost blinded by an increase in the glow. About five recreational vehicles and maybe eight or nine tents are scattered about in a rough circle, taking over what looks like two or three separate campsites. Pavilions and tarps and awnings are strung back and forth across the site providing shelter from the rain, and strings of multi-colored electric lights run back and forth overhead, attached to tree branches and RV mirrors and pavilion poles. Some sort of portable heating device sits in the center of the area. A nearby portable speaker booms out the hypnotic dance music, with a multitude of people milling around.

The crowd is one of the strangest groups of humans I've ever seen. Many of them are dressed in brightly colored costumes, or are wearing nothing or close to nothing. Fairy wings and animal ears and other accouterments are worn by many of the women, while a good many of the men are naked or half-naked and covered from head to toe in what looks like tribal war paint. One man is wearing a three piece business suit and no shoes. Another is butt naked except for a mask of Pope Obama, and is standing next to a barbecue grill passing out communion wafers that look suspiciously like hits of acid. Several of them are dancing, a few are sitting around the heater, nearly all of them appear to be on drugs.

“What ho! How fare ye, fellow fucking traveler?”

A middle-aged man wearing Wrangler™ jeans, no shirt, bright red war paint on his face and chest and a jingling court jester's cap on his head calls out to me, and the others gradually become aware of me and turn to face me.

“Oh Jesus Fucking Christ, what now?!?” Rainbow Darsh mutters, hovering next to me.

Chapter 28

April 22, 2023. 2:34 AM.

The group is surprisingly welcoming. The guy in the jester's cap swears a lot, but he seems friendly enough. He introduces himself as Moon Mist. I tell him my name, and that I got lost in the woods. I don't elaborate on who I am or what I'm doing wandering around the forest in the middle of the night, and none of them ask, so I leave it at that. Moon Mist takes me into one of the RVs, a big, expensive looking motorhome that's nicer than my apartment, and tells me I can use the shower and change clothes if I want.

I decide not to look a gift horse in the mouth as it were. I have a nice hot shower, and pick out a brightly colored shirt and a pair of track pants from the closet. When I go back outside, the others are dancing and cavorting as they were before, and don't pay any more attention to my joining them than they would if I'd been with them all along.

I don't see Moon Mist around, but somebody tells me I can help myself to some food if I want. I realize the gas station chow I swiped from Bigg Piney's car hadn't done much for me, so I head over to a nearby table, which is laden with all sorts of expensive-looking gourmet food. A guy manning a nearby propane grill offers to cook me a steak however I want it, so I get one medium rare and grab a stuffed baked potato off the table. There's a bowl of punch nearby, so I grab a cupful of that as well.

“Woo hoo mother fucker! You having a great fucking time? I'm having a great fucking time.”

I look up from my food as Moon Mist sits down next to me. He's grinning like a psychopath, and he keeps twitching and fidgeting in a manner consistent with how I've been told people on cocaine usually behave.

“Uh, yeah. Great time. Thanks for the clothes.”

He claps me on the back, a little harder than I would like.

“Yeah, yeah, good fucking times. All of us fucking cocksuckers are having a great fucking time. I'm having a fucking great time! Good times, good times.”

He keeps rocking back and forth on his seat, grinning like the God of Death. Something about him strikes me as weirdly familiar, but I can't quite put a finger on it. Meanwhile, he keeps babbling and swearing almost nonstop, about anything and everything. Normally this level of social interaction would be a bit much for me, but since he's doing almost all of the talking I can get away with simply nodding and smiling to most of it.

Eventually he gets up and wanders off, and I return to eating my meal and watching the crowd. I'm starting to feel a little weird. Colors suddenly seem much brighter and more interesting, the

movements of the crowd leave motion trails that fascinate me. I look at the half empty cup in my hands and slowly it dawns on me that I probably should have asked what it was before I started drinking it. I quickly pour out the rest of it onto the ground.

“Pity to waste that.”

I turn my head to the side. The brightly painted canvas before me blurs into a beautiful rainbow with the movement, and I'm almost sorry to see it end. The man who I'm facing when the light show is finished is maybe forty years old, Filipino or maybe some other kind of lesser Asian, and quite obviously as gay as the day is long.

“Yeah, sorry,” I mumble, looking down at my hand as if I've never seen it before. I open and close it over and over, the movement suddenly fascinating to me. “I think I dropped it.”

The man laughs.

“So, I've never seen you at one of our parties before, sweetie,” he says. “How did you find us, if you don't mind my asking?”

It takes me a minute to process what he just asked me, but eventually I am able to divert my attention away from my clutching hand and back towards the little homo sitting next to me.

“Um...I was...I got lost in the woods.”

The man laughs again and takes a sip from the drink in his hand. The liquid in the glass is a deep, vibrant blue, and the way it glows faintly when the glass catches the overhanging party lights is suddenly the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

“What's your name, sweet cheeks?”

“Tips Fedora.”

“Tips Fedora? That's kind of a strange name.”

My mind churns, searching for a witty retort. File not found, unfortunately. Meanwhile, the man keeps talking.

“So what do you do, Tips Fedora?”

“I'm a detective.”

“A detective? Ooh, sounds exciting. What do you detect?”

My brain stumbles as I try to remember how words work. I can't tell if this little freak is hitting on me or making fun of me, but either way I kind of wish he'd wander off someplace the fuck else. I glance over at the artificial heater, which appears to be glowing bright purple. I see Rainbow Darsh and Flutterbutts whirling around it, chasing each other in a big circle and laughing. They slowly begin to glow purple too, and it dawns on me suddenly that the heater is a nuclear reactor.

“Get away from that!” I yell out frantically, flailing my arms, and the guy next to me starts a

little.

“Excuse me?”

I turn to him.

“I was talking to the ponies,” I mutter.

“Oh, well that's a relief. So anyway, you were going to tell me what you're investigating?”

I turn a worried glance back to the nuclear reactor, but the ponies seem to have taken my advice and floated off elsewhere.

“I'm solving a murder case.” I say to the gayboi.

“A murder case? Well doesn't *that* just sound exciting. Is that why you were in the woods?”

“Yeah.” I suddenly start giggling for no reason at all. “Somebody killed Bigg Piney.”

He laughs along with me.

“No *wonder* he hasn't shown up yet. He was supposed to perform at our party tonight, I think.

Well, I guess we're just going to have to do something *else* for entertainment, now aren't we?”

I'm about to start laughing again, but something in what he just said sets off an alarm bell in the back of my brain. I look at the expression on his face, notice his hand resting on my knee, and suddenly I realize he's talking about gay stuff. Butt stuff.

“Oh, I uh...”

I begin to panic, but fortunately I'm saved when Moon Mist suddenly reappears.

“COO COO CA CHOO, MOTHER FUCKER! I AM THE MOTHER FUCKING WALRUS!”

He appears seemingly out of nowhere, stretching his arms out wide and shouting at the top of his lungs. He takes on the appearance of a red-skinned gargoyle, complete with wings and fangs, and I'm so startled that my lawn chair tips over and I go flying backwards. The little gay guy, meanwhile, seems less than impressed.

“Dammit, Malcolm...” he mutters, but Moon Mist pays him no heed, and continues to rapid-fire old John Lennon lyrics while a gathering crowd laughs and applauds.

Malcolm. I stare at the screaming apparition before me, and suddenly recognition clicks in my brain. Between the bad light and the face paint and the drugs I hadn't realized it before, but the man standing in front of me, delivering an impromptu recitation of “I Am The Walrus” and calling himself Moon Mist, is Malcolm Crowley, the Governor of Oregon.

Chapter 29

April 22, 2023. 12:15 PM.

I awaken in a dark, confined space, and for one confused, panicked moment I worry again that I've been buried alive. Flutterbutts appears and wraps her wing around my shoulders, whispering soothing gibberish about the coming workers' paradise into my ear, and I realize that I'm lying on a mattress with a pillow underneath my head. Slowly, the events of the previous night come back to me. This is the third time in as many days that I've woken up either drunk, injured, in an unfamiliar place, or all of the above, and I'm starting to get tired of it.

I reach out and slide open the shade over the little window. Daylight immediately floods into the little bunk, and I see trees and road whizzing past. The uneasiness immediately returns along with my memory. Malcolm Crowley, or "Moon Mist," and the little Filipino guy, whose name I've learned is Felipe Gonzales-Crowley, the Governor's gay missus, had been gracious enough to let me sleep in one of the guest bunks of their motorhome last night. However, the motorhome had not been moving then and I had rather expected that to still be true when I awoke in the morning.

I roll over and slide open the little door. I crawl out of the bunk and drop down onto the floor. I'm still wearing the multicolored shirt and purple track pants I borrowed the previous night. My first thought is to wonder how complicated it would be to get my own clothes washed and back onto me as soon as possible. I look around in confusion for a moment, and then realize that the RV I showered and left my clothes in the previous night was not the one I'm riding in currently. Well, shit; first my fedora and now my trench coat and cargo shorts. Looks like on top of everything else that's happened I now have to buy new clothes.

"Good morning, sunshine."

A familiar voice calls out pleasantly. A curtain hangs partially open, separating the area at the back of the motorhome with the sleeping compartments from the common room area, and I can see Felipe seated at the table. I trudge carefully out and sit down.

"Want some eggs?"

I hesitate for a moment, and then nod. Felipe heads over to the little galley kitchen and begins cracking eggs and frying bacon, with an impressive amount of dexterity considering we're riding in a moving RV.

"How do you like them?" he calls over his shoulder.

"Over easy," I mutter uncomfortably.

I've recovered most of my memories of the previous evening, but large chunks between the

party and the point where I wound up crawling into a bunk are disturbingly fuzzy, especially considering that the last things I remember was that I inadvertently dosed myself with some kind of psychedelic, and that this creepy little homo had been trying to get into my borrowed pants.

Felipe sets a plate of eggs and bacon and a little cup of coffee onto the table in front of me. I thank him, and begin to eat, pointedly staring out the window and avoiding eye contact. Felipe seems amused, which only makes me more uncomfortable.

“Nothing happened last night, if that's what you're worried about,” he says finally.

I turn to see him smirking at me and lighting a cigarette.

“Malcolm certainly seems to take a fancy to you, though,” he continues. “He was the one who insisted we bring you along, after all.”

For a single confused moment I almost blurt out that I thought Malcolm was a serial womanizer, then I realize that there's a high probability he keeps his dalliances a secret from his husband, so I snap my mouth shut just in time. I quickly change the subject.

“Where are we going?”

“Salem,” says Felipe. “Sorry we Shanghaied you, but we have to get back, and we didn't want to wake you. We also rather assumed you didn't have any transportation to get back to...wherever it is you're from.”

I hesitate for a second, then realize that he's basically correct, and then nod. I squirt some more sriracha sauce on my eggs.

“Where is Malcolm, anyway?” I ask.

Felipe's expression darkens momentarily, then he sighs.

“Sleeping it off,” he says. “In the back.”

He gestures to the rear of the motorhome, to the closed door beyond the sleeping bunks, which presumably leads to some kind of master suite.

I blink suddenly as I realize something.

“Who's driving the motorhome?”

“Oh, that would be Candi.”

“Is she your assistant or something?”

“She?” Felipe looks amused again. “Well, 'assistant' is probably a good word for it, but I wouldn't let Candi catch you saying 'she'. Or 'he'. Pronouns can be kind of a complicated subject with Candi.”

Another one of those then. Delightful.

In about an hour the motorhome rolls into Salem. Malcolm had woken up sometime between

breakfast and when we stopped for gas, and has been talkative ever since. He seems only slightly less manic sober than he did when he was coked out of his mind, although for all I know he might have started the day off with a couple of toots.

Once we're in the city limits, I tell them they can drop me off anywhere, but neither one of them will hear a word of it. Malcolm wants me to stick around for dinner at least, and Felipe insists that I spend the night; they'll even rent me a car in the morning if I like. Malcolm immediately concurs, and I'm not getting the impression it's negotiable.

Right now, the most wonderful thing in the world I can think of would be to go back home to my shitty apartment and resume my lonely plebeian existence. An evening at the Governor's Mansion with Crowley and the Missus sounds only marginally more pleasant than crawling back into the hole that Bigg Piney was going to leave me in. So naturally I agree, and the motorhome makes its way to an ostentatious Tudor style mansion surrounded by gates and guards.

The assistant, Candi, shows me to my quarters. Whatever I had been expecting from this individual, my imagination couldn't hold a candle to the actual experience of meeting him/her/xier. Individuals with strange gender configurations are common enough, but most of them are pretty gruesome-looking hack jobs. You're not supposed to mention it, of course; you're just supposed to feel casually uncomfortable around them, and as long as they think you feel guilty about it they're basically satisfied. Or at least as satisfied as they're likely to get.

Not Candi, though. Whoever did the surgery on this one is a master artist. This person is such a strange combination of overtly male and female characteristics I feel it might be quite literally impossible to determine their actual gender.

Eventually, I'm left alone in a magnificently appointed room, and I can relax a little. Not much, unfortunately. This room is so magnificently appointed it's basically impossible to relax in. Most of the stuff in here looks like it would cost a couple grand just to look at. I'm frankly not quite sure just what the hell I'm supposed to be doing in here until dinner. There's an attached bathroom however, so I take another shower to kill some time.

When I'm out and dressed, I find that a less androgynous servant has been waiting patiently in the doorway. He tells me that Mr. Crowley has asked to see me in his private study, and he would be happy to show me the way. I don't get the impression that I have much of a choice, so I follow the guy down a hall and up another flight of stairs, through a heavy oak door at the end of an alcove.

Governor Crowley's private study is a beautiful, stately room, with oak-paneled walls and shelves of books that look old and expensive, and probably haven't been opened since the house was built. At an enormous, elegant desk sits Malcolm Crowley himself, reclining in his chair and

drumming his hands on the surface of the desk in tune with the music blasting out of a portable speaker nearby. The song is “Sweet Dreams” by Marilyn Manson, from the 1995 EP *Smells Like Children*, designated Problematic in October 2018 for reasons of Racist and Homophobic Content. The offending tracks “Fuck Frankie” and “Rock n' Roll Nigger” were cut and the newly-sanitized EP was reissued a month later. It is currently available on iTunes™.

“Tips *Fucking* Fedora!” he yells the instant he sees me, and slaps an open palm against the surface of the desk. “Shit, buddy, how the fuck are you doing? Your room okay?”

I approach the desk and sit down in the chair opposite him.

“It's just fine. No complaints.”

He slaps the desk again and grins broadly.

“All right, man!”

He reaches into the desk drawer and carefully pulls out a mirror, upon which are laid out several lines of white powder. He puts it on the desk in front of him and grabs a rolled-up hundred dollar bill lying nearby.

“Want a bump?”

He offers me the bill, and looks genuinely disappointed when I politely but firmly decline. However, the two lines he snorts seem to cheer him up immensely. His eyes dart restlessly around the room, brimming with the kind of manic energy that only the insane and the chemically refreshed can ever truly experience. Meanwhile, “Sweet Dreams” draws to a close, and he pulls a phone out of his pocket and starts the track over again.

“I fucking love this song,” he proclaims, “Do you like this song?”

I'm familiar with it, but it's not really my kind of thing. However, I politely inform him that I do, in fact, like this song, and he slaps the table and grunts as if he'd just scored some major argumentative victory.

“I *fucking love* this song,” he exclaims again, and begins drumming on the table and singing along.

I find myself getting increasingly less comfortable the longer I'm in the same room with this guy. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I should excuse myself and go take another shower, when he turns his attention to me again.

“Did that faggot Felipe give you any trouble?”

It seems like an odd way to refer to his dearly beloved, and it catches me a little by surprise.

“No, not really,” I say. Crowley grins broadly.

“Great! Good. Don't fucking worry about him, and don't let him get to you. He's a fucking

faggot, and he's catty as all hell when he thinks I'm sniffing around other dudes' assholes or whatever. They're all like that. Faggots, I mean. Fucking dick sucking queers.”

He says all of this so casually it's almost shocking even to me. My mind inexplicably recalls an old campaign ad in which he stands at a podium adorned with a rainbow flag, emotionally decrying the many abuses heaped upon the gay community over the centuries. However I keep a straight face and nod pleasantly, as if we're just two old friends having a friendly chat.

“Don't fucking worry about that faggot, he's harmless,” he continues. “If he gives you any shit just let him suck your dick or something. That fucking faggot loves sucking dick. He fucking sucks my dick pretty good. I ain't a faggot, though. Are you a faggot?”

I confess to him that no, I am not.

“Good, I hate faggots. Like, I don't fucking *hate* hate them, but they're just a pain in the ass to be around sometimes, you know what I mean? Like fucking Felipe, pain in the fucking ass. Fags are a pain in the ass, heh. Literally a fucking pain in the ass!”

He throws back his head and laughs hysterically at his own *bon mot*. I decide to take a gamble and ask the obvious.

“Who, me? Oh, you mean the whole fucking gay married thing. Yeah, I mean sure, I'm like married to a faggot, I'm not really a faggot though. Not like a gay faggot or anything.”

He reaches into the desk and grabs a pack of Camel™ filters, then lights one and takes a long drag.

“The whole faggot thing is just for voters,” he goes on, “You know how it fucking is in politics. You think a fucking straight white guy is going to get elected? Hell no; you need a fucking gimmick. It's cool, though; I just do this whole faggot thing and they keep electing me. I've been governor for like eight years now. It ain't bad. Comes with a fucking nice house. Ain't this a nice fucking house?”

I nod. Meanwhile he continues talking as if he hadn't even been expecting an answer.

“Felipe's alright, he just gets to be a catty bitch sometimes. Like he gets on the rag sometimes and starts bitching, like a fucking woman, so I have to fuck him the ass a little or let him suck my dick to shut him the fuck up. It's not gay, though, it's just politics. Do you vote?”

I confess that I don't. He nods approvingly.

“Good. Waste of fucking time. Anyone who votes is a fucking moron, I'd lose respect for you if you told me you were a fucking voter. Would you vote for me? I sure as fucking hell wouldn't vote for me. People vote for me, though. I don't even goddamn do anything and people keep fucking voting for me every goddamn year or two years or however the hell often they do it, just because I tell them I like to suck faggot cock. Voters are fucking stupid as hell.”

He takes another long drag and puts the cigarette out in a nearby ashtray. The phone beeps and “Sweet Dreams” momentarily cuts out. Crowley, currently in the middle of improvising a hand-drum accompaniment to the Manson band's original anguished guitar solo, roars with annoyance and skims the text message that appears on the screen.

“Fuck,” he says. “Looks like fucking dinner's ready. You ready to go down and have some fucking dinner, Tips Fedora? Fuck, let's go find out what that fucking faggot had that faggot chef cook for us. Probably grilled French cock or some shit. Come on, Tips Fedora, let's go eat some fucking grilled French faggot cock!”

He concludes this with a loud masculine grunt, taps out another quick drum solo for good measure, and leaps to his feet. I have little choice but to follow downstairs to the dining room.

Chapter 30

April 23, 2023. 11:27 am.

I get up as early as I can, which turns out to be around ten o'clock, take another quick shower for good measure, and head downstairs. Breakfast is waiting for me, although I don't see any sign of either the governor or his husbando. I'm rather hoping I can just get out of here without seeing either of them. They'd told me they'd rent a car for me but frankly I'm not even worried about it. I just want to get the hell out of here; I can find my own way home.

Unfortunately, my luck's not that great these days. As I head out into the foyer, Felipe calls out to me from an adjoining hallway.

"Mr. Fedora?"

I turn and greet him politely.

"I suppose you'll be leaving us now?" he asks.

I nod.

"Yeah. I've got to get back to work, unfortunately."

Felipe smiles thinly.

"Oh yes, I'm sure the transportation industry has just been in shambles since you've been away."

I don't much care for the tone in his voice, so I frown and don't answer. He grins, and tosses something at me. I grab it out of the air, and see that it's a set of keys.

"I've rented you a car. You'll need it to get back to Portland, right?"

I eye him suspiciously. There's something about this guy that I don't like. I haven't liked it since the moment I met him. He's got an angle, but I can't for the life of me figure out what it is. At this point though, I don't really care. I thank him, and turn to go.

"I do wish you'd consider sticking around for a little while longer, though."

I turn around slowly. I know a veiled threat when I hear one.

"Why would I do that?" I ask.

He smiles thinly again.

"It's as I said, Malcolm likes you. He wants you to stick around. I've made arrangements for you to do so, if you like."

"Yeah? What kind of arrangements?"

He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out an envelope, suddenly all business.

"You'll be compensated to the tune of three thousand dollars a month, plus I've got an apartment you can stay in. You're free to use the car as well."

“In exchange for what?”

He smiles again, an oily, suggestive leer that I don't like the look of. He shrugs.

“Like I said, Malcolm likes you.”

Realization hits me, and I feel physically ill.

“Wait a minute, are you suggesting...?”

I throw the keys angrily at him. They bounce off his chest and land on the floor with a clunk.

“Keep your damn car,” I snarl at him. “I'll take the bus.”

I open the door and step outside, but he calls out, and something in his tone makes me pause and turn around.

“You know, something you said the other night really made me curious.”

“Oh yeah, what's that?” I eye him suspiciously.

“Well, remember how we were talking, and you said 'Bigg Piney was just killed?' Well, I thought that was a little curious, so I had Candi drive back out and poke around in the woods near that campground. And as it turns out, he found something really interesting. Want to know what it was?”

“I've got an idea.” I narrow my eyes. “So what? You don't know anything.”

Felipe shrugs.

“Well, if you want to take your chances, that's fine by me I suppose. It's not like you're anyone special, after all; I'm sure Malcolm will find someone else in a couple of weeks. He tends to get bored fairly quickly anyway. Still though, I'd hate for the situation to get out of hand for you. I mean, a dead body in the woods, you wandering around out there, all covered in mud. That's the kind of situation where misunderstandings tend to happen.”

“Listen,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “I don't know what it is you think you've got on me, but I didn't touch that guy. He slipped and he fell, cracked his head on a rock. I had nothing to do with it. Any half-competent investigation would find as much.”

He shrugs indifferently.

“Maybe,” he says. “Maybe not. Investigations can be a little tricky sometimes. Bigg Piney knew a lot of people. Powerful people. He had a lot of friends. I've got a lot of friends. You? You don't have any friends, from what I can tell, and even if you did I doubt they'd be very powerful. Truth can be a matter of interpretation sometimes. You understand, don't you?”

An uncomfortable knot that's been forming in my stomach ever since this conversation started tightens abruptly. Felipe smiles, apparently deciding to take my silence as a victory.

“Don't worry, sweetie, you'll be fine. Like I said, he gets bored quickly. Address is in the envelope along with your first month's compensation.”

He holds out the envelope and the keys. Wordlessly I take them, and storm out the door, my ears beginning to burn. How the hell do I keep getting myself into these situations? I can feel him smirking at me as I walk to a black sedan parked at the end of the driveway.

“Make sure he wears a condom!” he calls out.

Chapter 31

April 23, 2023. 12:12 PM.

“Holy jeez, how did you get yourself roped into that?”

Rainbow Darsh laughs hysterically at me from the backseat. I clench the steering wheel with a white knuckle grip, staring at the red traffic light and grinding my teeth.

“I didn't have a choice,” I growl at her. She laughs again.

“Of course you had a choice, retard. Tell him to fuck off. What is he gonna do, call the cops on you for refusing butt sex?”

“It's not that simple.”

“Sure it isn't.” She snickers. “Yeah, well, anyway, don't drop the soap I guess!”

She gives one last unhelpful cackle and vanishes. I glower at Flutterbutts, sitting in the passenger seat next to me, as if daring her to say something. She turns her head quickly and stares out the window.

“It really isn't that simple,” I say.

“I believe you,” she says, continuing to stare out the window.

Neither of us says anything else. The light turns green, and I drive forward, following the GPS instructions to the address I'd plugged in.

My first instinct as soon as I'd gotten into the car was to just drive back to Portland with the money and call that faggot's bluff. I don't have any delusions about his connections or the integrity of the system, so I don't doubt he'd try to pull something, but his position isn't as strong as he lets on. He could try to put Bigg Piney's death on me no doubt; get it ruled as a murder and have me fingered for it. The Governor's man-wife probably has enough clout to do that at least. Maybe it would work, maybe not.

Even in a crooked system there are limits to just how far you can stretch the truth, and there's a lot of other players here besides just Felipe and the Governor. Bigg Piney was obviously an enforcer of some kind for Macadamia, who is clearly into more than just his day job at Nike™. Macadamia would probably have no objection if I went to prison, of course. He wanted me dead anyway, so if I take the fall for Piney's death it just ties up a loose end. Still, a guy like him has as many enemies as he has friends. If Macadamia goes down for ordering a hit, that leaves the top spot open for the next hood who wants to rise up and make a grab for it.

The more I think about it, the more it dawns on me that if I go anywhere near Portland I'm a dead man. Macadamia wanted me dead anyway, and I killed his hitman. Not just his hitman; Piney

was also a friend and a business asset. On top of that, I could testify and put him away. Macadamia's probably got hoods tearing the city apart looking for me as it is. If he finds me, there's no scenario where I get out of this alive.

“So what does that leave?” I muse out loud.

Flutterbutts glances back at me but doesn't answer. I don't need her to.

I can't go home, that much is clear. I could still take the car and the money and just split, but three grand isn't going to get me very far, and the car can be traced to the Governor's office. Plus Felipe would probably have every trooper in the state out looking for me. They'd pick me up before I made it out of town.

“Looks like I'm the Governor's ass slave, then,” I mutter. Flutterbutts reddens but maintains her silence.

I pull into the lot of a little apartment building in Keizer. The key in the envelope opens the door to unit C. It's actually a pretty nice little place, maybe an economic notch or two above my commieblock. Hardwood floors, a bedroom, a bathroom, a living room. The place is furnished; I'm guessing I'm not the first person to stay here under an arrangement like this. I should probably wash the sheets a few times before I sleep in them. Still, the place seems nice enough. Better than a hole in the ground, at least.

I go into the bathroom to relieve myself, and take a look in the mirror. I'm still wearing the same outfit from the other night, and I'm getting pretty damn sick of seeing myself in it. Before I do anything else, I'm going to need to get some new clothes.

I think about my wallet and phone, that disappeared the night Piney tried to bury me. They're both probably at the bottom of the river somewhere; at any rate I hadn't found them on Bigg Piney's body or in his car. Getting a new neetbux card shouldn't be a problem, I just have to go down to the Social Security office and tell them I lost mine. Ditto with the phone, since that was a gibsmemat as well. It might not be the smartest idea, though, if Macadamia's crew is looking for me.

Felipe had left a new phone for me inside the car, although I'm guessing it's probably bugged and I should chuck it if I eventually decide to take off anywhere. I look in the envelope; sure enough there's \$3,000 in crisp hundred dollar bills in there. I've got cash and a place to sleep, that's probably enough until I can figure out something better.

I've got nothing particularly better to do, so I take the car keys and do a bit of exploring. I find a Ross™ not far from the apartment and get myself a new pair of shorts and a couple of T-shirts, then grab some McDonalds™. I think about buying another trench coat and fedora, but it doesn't feel right to me somehow. I can't replace articles that essential on Felipe's dirty cash. Besides, I'm in hiding; it's

probably a good idea to adopt a new look anyway. I'll stay semi-incognito for now.

I tool around for a bit, exploring the city. I've never really been to Salem before, although I can't say it looks too different from what I'm used to. Buildings, streets, rain, people. Rich yuppie hipster crap at the city center, commieblocks and convenience stores further out. Homeless camps tucked away wherever they won't be noticed, a symbol of civilization's steady decay conveniently wallpapered over with half-assed solutions. Same as it ever was.

Chapter 32

May 19, 2023. 9:57 PM.

Rain patters against the roof of my sedan. The windshield wipers swish back and forth. Vapid pop music toots unpleasantly out of the speakers. “Fist my Revolting Beef Curtains” by Miley Cyrus™, from her 2016 album *Who Literally Gives a Fuck*. Meets all industry-standard content qualifications and will never be designated Problematic. Currently available and featured on iTunes™.

I switch the station. The next one is playing an almost identical song, so I switch it again. Same deal. Thankfully the radio is mostly commercials these days anyway so I don't have to suffer very long. Of all the things I miss about my old life, I feel the absence of my revolving music discs the most acutely.

I received a text from Governor Crowley earlier. He wants to hang out tonight. I don't have much choice but to accommodate him. Our arrangement isn't as bad as I thought it was going to be, although it's a bit complicated. Felipe is convinced that Malcolm cheats on him with other men. He's basically accepted it, but their deal is that he's only allowed one paramour at a time, whom Felipe has to approve. I'm currently being paid/blackmailed to be some sort of designated ass slave that fills this role, apparently until Crowley gets bored with me.

However, Crowley isn't actually gay, so when he steps out he uses me as a cover to conceal the fact that he mostly spends the time beating up hookers and snorting blow. Meanwhile I get a free apartment to lay low in and a better income than I'd have otherwise, and the only price tag is that I have to endure his company for a few hours at a time. It's a weirdly beneficial arrangement for both of us, at least for the time being.

A new song starts playing on the radio. This one I recognize. “Street Niggas” by Bigg Piney featuring Nikki Minaj. Released posthumously as a single. Also appears on the Bigg Piney tribute album “Pine Boxx: A Tribute to Bigg Piney,” featuring most of the top artists from Smoov Groov Records. The album was cobbled together and released in an impressively short period of time; it dropped only a few short days after Piney's death was announced.

Sadly, my deal with Felipe didn't include a computer, and I wouldn't trust one given to me by the likes of him anyway, so I've had no Dark Web access in almost a month. I have no idea what's been going on in Portland since I left. I have ActaDiurna™ on the phone he gave me, so I can get the official version of the news, but that's not saying much.

Governor Crowley is waiting inside when I get in. He's got his own key of course, although he usually doesn't abuse the privilege.

“Tips Fedora, you raging mongoloid faggot, get the fuck in here!” he instantly yells as I walk in. “And close the fucking door!”

He's obviously as high as a kite. More so than usual, even. His eyes are bloodshot and there's a bit of coke still crusted around the rim of his nostril. He's pacing nervously around the room, smoking a cigarette.

“Mind putting that out?” I ask dryly. He ignores me and keeps smoking.

“We got a big fucking night tonight, buddy,” he says, pacing back and forth like a madman. “We got some real fucking important people to meet. Big people. Huge. Fucking gigantic. We're gonna have a good time, too, real good fucking time. You ready to have a good fucking time? I'm ready to have a good fucking time!”

He bellows and punches my wall.

I have no idea how this guy's managed to live this long without suffering a massive coronary, but at this point I'm used to his coked out antics. I keep quiet and wait for him to get to the point. Eventually he stops pacing, looks at his watch, and stomps towards the door.

“Come on, faggot,” he barks at me. “We gotta go, gotta get moving. Important things to do, very important. Gotta get going, move, MOVE!”

I follow him outside. We get into my car, and he instantly plugs his phone into my stereo. For the trip he selects Guns n' Roses' 1987 album *Appetite for Destruction*, currently available on iTunes™ minus a couple of tracks, and immediately begins drumming along on the dash.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

He looks at me as if he'd forgotten I was there.

“What? Oh. Fuck. Yeah. Mendy's, go to Mendy's.”

Mendy's is a strip club downtown, owned by a Mexican guy reputed to be connected to one of the cartels. I know the way there by now. It's not the kind of place the Governor would normally want to be seen in, but he's got a VIP room on permanent reserve. We go in through the back entrance as usual, and one of the tattooed goons guarding the door waves us up the stairs.

The VIP room is a dimly lit, gaudily furnished room, with a two-way mirror in one wall that looks down on the main club. Usually our time here consists of Crowley snorting more coke and screwing around with a couple of the girls, while I sit in the corner enduring a complimentary lap dance from a woman that usually smells like some combination of sweat, perfume and tequila. Tonight's a little different, though.

There's a big table in the center of the room, with dinner laid out on it and a couple of bottles of expensive liquor. Five people are sitting around it, one of whom I instantly recognize. My stomach

tightens up as I see a black guy wearing an ostentatious purple silk suit and purple bowler hat cocked at an angle. Macadamia grins broadly when he sees me entering with Crowley, but says nothing.

The others are even more noteworthy. Mwandishi Williams, a tattooed Congolese rapper who has been the Mayor of Portland for a couple of years, sits eating chicken wings and talking to a stripper sitting on his lap. Dakota Jackson-Pittman, the 24 year old Multnomah County representative, sits across from him, playing some sort of game on her phone. Another guy, an enormously fat middle-aged Hispanic man, looks vaguely familiar but I can't place his name. Last but not least is a well-dressed older woman with a purple crew cut who I definitely recognize: Janet Callahan-McDougal, the Vel Johnson family attorney who'd represented me when I was arrested. If she recognizes me, she doesn't let it show on her face.

Crowley pulls up a chair and sits down, and a stripper immediately sits down on his lap and puts a cigar in his mouth. There aren't any more available chairs at the table, and I feel like it would be a bit presumptuous to join them anyway, so I do what I normally do and take a seat on the leather couch against the far wall. However, this time, Smoov Macadamia speaks up, snapping his fingers in my direction.

“Mind telling your boy to wait outside, Crowley? This shit don't really concern him.”

Crowley turns and nods to me, and I get up and head back downstairs. I don't particularly feel like trying to chat up the door guard, so I step back outside and wait with my hands in the pocket of my hoodie, watching the light rain making little ripples on the surface of puddles in the parking lot.

About half an hour goes by. I don't particularly mind waiting, but I'm starting to get hungry. I'm half debating going back in and seeing if I can talk the door guard into grabbing me something from the kitchen, when the metal back door of the club swings open. I'm expecting Crowley, but Smoov Macadamia steps out instead.

My muscles tense up instantly, but he doesn't do anything, he just stands next to me and pulls out a pack of Newports™. He lights one and offers me the pack, but I shake my head. He stands there, smoking his cigarette like he's waiting for me to say something, but I just keep staring out at the rain.

“You coming up in the world, white boy,” he says finally.

I shrug but don't answer.

“What are you, like the Governor's butt buddy now?” He laughs. “Yeah, you coming up in the world alright. Cheap ass motherfucker.”

He finishes his cigarette and tosses it. It lands in a puddle not far off and sizzles its life out. Macadamia turns to go, but pauses with his hand on the door, and then turns back to me, leaning uncomfortably close. He smells like menthol and too much cologne.

“I ain't forgot about Piney,” he says. “That motherfucker was like a brother to me. Beautiful person. Not only that, he was an important business asset. I was gonna make him bigger than Biggie. Now ain't nobody gonna ever experience his artistic vision. That's something you gonna have to answer for, eventually.”

He turns back to the door.

“Please,” I blurt out. “You've probably got a whole vault full of his unused vocal takes. That no-talent <*African American*> can churn out as many albums dead as he could alive, and you won't even have to pay him royalties. I did you a favor.”

A fist comes sailing through the air at lightning speed, and the next thing I know I'm lying on my back, staring up at an arc-sodium light flickering overhead and feeling the rainwater soak into the back of my hoodie. Macadamia stands above me, grinning maliciously downward, the arc-sodium light reflecting off the silky sheen of his jacket.

“See, that's your problem, white boy. You always talking when you ought to just keep your mouth shut. That's why niggas like you don't last. Tick tock.”

He turns to go once more, pulling open the door and stepping back into the noise of the club.

“Cheap ass motherfucker,” he says as the door closes.

Rainbow Darsh materializes, squatting on her haunches, perching on my chest as she stares down into my eyes.

“He's right, you know,” she says.

Chapter 33

July 14, 2023. 8:31 PM.

I knew something was wrong before I even pulled into the driveway. I knew it the instant I got Felipe's text. Felipe hasn't called or texted or contacted me in any way since the last time I was at this house. He sends Candi by once a month with an envelope stuffed full of bills, and that's about the extent of my dealings with him.

I pull into the driveway of the Governor's mansion. The guard at the front gate seems to be expecting me, because the gate slides open as soon as I pull up, and he doesn't bother to stop me or check ID. I head up the long drive and park near the garages, then get out and head to the front door.

Candi opens the door and leads me upstairs. Zhe takes me to the master bedroom suite, where Crowley is laid out on the mattress, unconscious or dead. Felipe is pacing around nervously. He snaps to attention the second I walk in the room.

"Shut the door," he says. I do.

I head over to the bed and examine Crowley. He's clearly breathing, although by the look of him he's in a pretty deep sleep, probably chemically induced.

"Is he alright?" I ask.

Felipe nods.

"The doctor gave him some kind of sedative," he says. "He'll be okay."

"What happened?"

Felipe sighs heavily.

"He was drunk. Coked up too, probably. He said he didn't want to live anymore, that he was going to kill himself."

As if remembering something suddenly, he walks over to a nearby dresser and picks up a revolver that was sitting on top. He slides it into his jacket pocket.

"If he wakes up and wants to know where this is, tell him I have no idea," he says.

"Alright." I cross over to the bar in the corner, and grab a Diet Coke™ out of the little mini fridge. "So, what exactly did you need me to rush out here for?"

Felipe gives me a nasty look.

"You're his lover, aren't you?"

I shrug and open the soda can.

"If you say so."

"He could have died, you know."

“So what was I supposed to do about it? Fuck him back to life?”

“Oh, I don't know!”

Felipe suddenly throws up his hands in exasperation. He reaches into his jacket pocket with a trembling hand and slides a cigarette out of his pack. He sits down in a nearby easy chair and starts crying. I don't particularly feel like consoling him, so I stand there and sip my Diet Coke™ like a smug prick until he regains his composure.

“Can I go now?” I ask. “Seems like you've got this situation pretty much under control.”

Felipe glares at me, then shakes his head.

“No, I need you to stay here tonight,” he says. “If he wakes up, I want someone here. Try to keep him in bed. If he gets out of hand I'll have Candi waiting nearby, just shout through the door.”

“Any particular reason it has to be me?” I ask pointlessly.

He glares at me again and storms out of the room. I hear the soft click of the lock as he closes the door. Looks like I'm stuck.

I stare at Crowley breathing slowly on the bed for a few moments, then look around the room for something to do. There's a TV in the corner, so I flip it on and open Amazon-Netflix™, but nothing appeals to me right now, so I turn it off again. A little more interesting is the Apple™ laptop I see on a small desk in the corner. I open it up, and fortunately there's no password challenge.

It appears to be the Governor's personal laptop. I know I really shouldn't be surprised, considering what an irresponsible jackass he's proven himself to be thus far, but I'm nevertheless astounded by his lack of even basic security measures. He keeps official government documents and communications in his “Documents” folder, for God's sake. I have a little fun sifting through all of it, but there's nothing that tells me much about the shady operations of the State of Oregon that I hadn't suspected already, and eventually I get bored and close the window.

His calendar is a little more interesting. He's got all of his different types of appointments color-coded in a scheme that's almost insultingly simple to figure out. Personal stuff is pink, official State stuff is red, unofficial errands and business minutia are blue. Several areas are marked off in gunmetal grey, with initials of participants instead of names, so I figure these are his shady meetings. I see the initials TAJ, MW, DJP, and JM appear on the night of that meeting at the strip club a couple months ago, the one where Macadamia knocked me out. The same initials appear in various other gunmetal grey blocks, so they've clearly got something going on together.

Of particular note is that the gunmetal blocks sometimes contain address references like “40 NE Multnomah” and “120 SE Halsey,” with no other explanation given. The more I see them the more curious I get, so I do a little more snooping on the hard drive, and eventually find a slightly better

hidden folder buried innocuously in the middle of his porn collection. Turns out these aren't locations, they reference transactions, with the street names being the names of files that appear to be bitcoin wallets. The numbers reflect the amount in thousands of dollars. "NE" and "SE" refer to deposits or withdrawals.

The folder contains a ledger as well, completely unencrypted because holy shit is this guy ever bad at being a criminal. I wouldn't even make a half-passable accountant, but it's easy enough for me to see what's been going on. Turns out Malcolm and Felipe are pretty much in debt up to their eyeballs, and I'm guessing Felipe doesn't know as much about it as he probably thinks he does. Not surprising, considering the way Malcolm likes to party. In addition to his drug problem, I've seen him blow thousands of dollars in a single night: paying prostitutes, gambling, or just running up a huge bar tab. The guy's completely out of control.

The more I sift through it, the more I begin to see a pattern. An idea begins to take shape in the back of my mind, but it's not quite all there yet. Meanwhile, Crowley is beginning to stir a little on the bed, so I close the laptop and put it back where I found it.

He groans faintly, rubbing his face with his hands. He sits up, groggily staring around the room. Eventually he notices me sitting in the corner.

"Tips Fedora," he says. "Shit, buddy. What are you doing here? How the fuck are you?"

"Fine." I stand up. "Want something to drink?"

"Fuck yeah I do, make me a gin and tonic. Hold the fucking tonic."

I head over to the bar.

"Looks like your ball and chain took all the alcohol out of here. How about a soda?"

He grunts atonally, so I grab two more Diet Cokes™ out of the mini fridge and toss one to him. He pops the top and chugs it down in one gulp.

"What the fuck are you doing here, anyway?" he asks.

"Felipe called me, said you tried to kill yourself."

He shakes his head and throws the empty soda can at a trash can near the door. It doesn't even come close, bouncing off the wall with a loud clang and rolling underneath the dresser.

"That fucking faggot," he says. "He's such a fucking drama queen."

He rolls over in the bed, and begins hunting around in the drawer of the nightstand, probably looking for drugs which I hope Felipe at least had the sense to confiscate. I watch him intently for a minute, then eventually I decide to ask the question that's been on my mind.

"How bad is Macadamia juicing you?"

He turns slowly around and glares at me, his eyes shining with the cold, dangerous light of a

maniac's.

“That's none of your fucking business, Tips Fedora. Stay out of it. Where the fuck is my coke?”

I shrug, then get up and go back to the mini fridge for another soda.

“Look,” I continue. “He's probably going to kill me eventually one way or the other. I've got no one to tell, anyway. There's not a whole hell of a lot I could do with the information. You might as well get it off your chest; especially since it looks like Felipe locked us in.”

He stares evenly at me for a second.

“Why the fuck is Macadamia going to kill you?”

I shrug again.

“I have that effect on people.”

I snap open the top of the soda and take a long swallow. It's not Mountain Dew™, but it gets the job done. Crowley sighs and rubs his hands through his hair.

“Fuck,” he says. “I owe him a few mil, alright? My money's tied up in fucking investments and shit right now, so I can't exactly fucking pay him. So he comes to me with this fucking business deal he wants me to help set up.”

“What kind of deal?”

“There's this fucking cocksucker down in Medford that runs all the drugs in Southern Oregon, they're fighting for turf or some shit. Macadamia fucking wants to run it all, he says this guy is old and fucking done. So he asks me to use the state drug troopers or whatever the fuck to start cracking down on his deliveries. He's already got something set up with that fat faggot Mendez to get Medford cops on the guy.”

Mendez. That was the man I'd seen at Mendy's that night, the fat guy whose name I couldn't recall. Jorge Mendez, he's the chief of police in Medford. It's all starting to fall into place.

“Who is this guy? The one in Medford?”

Crowley shrugs. He's starting to twitch and fidget quite a bit, and has begun restlessly pacing about the room, opening and closing drawers and closets as if he's searching for something. Looks like whatever sedative this “doctor” must have given him is wearing off.

“I don't fucking know, some old faggot in Medford,” he growls. “I don't know his fucking name, nobody does. He's a fucking ghost.”

“So he's out of the picture then?”

“FUCK!!!” Crowley suddenly screams, picks up a chair, and flings it across the room. “Where the fuck is it!?”

“Calm down,” I say. “Where is what?”

“My coke, you cocksucking retard,” he snaps. “That fucking faggot Felipe took it. He fucking flushed it, I know it. I'm going to break that faggot's neck.”

“It's probably around here somewhere,” I lie. “Calm down, I'll help you look for it.”

I begin searching around the room, making a show of lifting up the mattress and the cushion of the chair I was sitting in earlier. Meanwhile, I keep grilling him.

“That Medford guy,” I say, “Is he gone now?”

“No,” mutters Crowley, as he pulls one of the drawers out of the dresser and tosses it on the ground. “He fucking found out about it somehow, I don't know. He's got some ace in the hole so the plan's off. They're working something out I guess. FUCKING SHIT!!”

He angrily flips the dresser over and storms to the door. When he finds it locked, he begins to pound frantically on it, yelling for Felipe. The door suddenly swings open and Candi lunges into the room, catching him off guard and shoving him backwards. He falls on his ass with his back against the bed. Felipe storms in behind Candi.

“What the hell is going on in here?!?” he demands.

Crowley glowers at him, his face a twisted mask of rage.

“Where the fuck are my fucking drugs, you cocksucker?!?” he shouts.

“Don't you raise your voice at me, Malcolm!” cries Felipe in a high, mincing shout.

Crowley jumps to his feet.

“My fucking drugs, you fucking queer!” he bellows. “Where the fuck are they?!?”

He lunges at Felipe, but Candi blocks his path. They face off for a moment, circling each other like pro wrestlers or something. The man/woman/whatever is apparently more dangerous than he/she/whatever looks, and I can tell by his/her/whatever movement's that he/she/whatever has probably had some martial arts training.

Crowley lunges forward, swinging his fist in a mighty arc that probably had enough power to cave Candi's skull in had it actually connected. However, Candi is surprisingly agile, and blocks his fist with one arm, catching it in another, then twisting his arm around quickly. I hear a sickening crack as Crowley's arm breaks, and then Candi tosses him across the room, where he trips over the dresser he tipped over and lands on his face.

Candi springs forward, probably planning to tackle and sedate him again, but he apparently underestimated just how badly Crowley needed a fix. He rolls over and pulls his leg back just as Candi jumps, and aims a powerful kick that stops the poor confused individual midair, and sends this person stumbling backward, clutching “their” solar plexus in agony.

With an enraged roar, Crowley is on his feet again, and seizes one of the dresser drawers with his good hand. He bears down on the transsexual before (s)he has a chance to recover, and swings the heavy wooden drawer violently downward onto the top of h(is)(er) skull with a wet thud, then whirls around in a circle and brings it around from the side again in an arc. I hear a crunch and a snap, and Candi's head twists around in a way that leaves absolutely no question about survival. Xe crumples to the floor in a heap.

Felipe lets out an ear piercing shriek that almost shatters my eardrums. When I look up, Crowley is advancing toward him menacingly, his broken arm hanging limply at his side, his good arm raised in a fist.

“What the fuck is your fucking problem, Felipe?” he snarls. “You see what you fucking made me do? What did you fucking think was going to happen if you flushed my fucking coke?”

“Get away from me, Malcolm!”

Felipe is gripping the revolver in both hands. He's backing slowly away towards the door as Malcolm keeps plodding methodically towards him.

“What are you going to do with that, you fucking faggot? Shoot me? Fuck you. Give me my fucking coke.”

He stomps his foot down and advances another pace. Felipe takes another step back, still aiming the gun.

“What the fuck is this about, Felipe?” growls Crowley. “I don't fuck you in the ass enough? Fine, give me my fucking coke and I'll fuck you in the ass all you want tonight. Drop your fucking pants right here and I'll stick it right up your goddamn faggot ass--”

BANG.

The revolver goes off. Crowley stands there for a moment, staring in disbelief at the bleeding hole in his chest, then looks up at Felipe with uncomprehending eyes. BANG. BANG BANG. He takes a single step backward and collapses on the floor, the life gone out of his eyes.

As if noticing me for the first time, Felipe turns slowly, pointing the barrel squarely at my chest. My heart is pounding frantically. I can feel adrenaline-soaked blood rushing past my ears. Tunnel vision blocks out everything except Felipe and the gun. Dimly, I can hear Flutterbutts' terrified voice somewhere in the back of my head, reciting passages from Marx's *Das Kapital* at a mile a minute. I can sense Rainbow Darsh whirling around the room somewhere but I don't see her. I stand, frozen, incapable of movement, as does Felipe, standing stock still with the gun trained on me. There's rage and sadness in his eyes. His finger twitches, whether it's because he's trying to pull the trigger or trying not to pull it I can't tell.

“Are you going to shoot me?” I say finally. My voice seems to break whatever spell it was that was holding the room frozen in time. Felipe glares hatefully at me for a moment longer, then lowers the gun, tears in his eyes but his expression otherwise blank.

“Why would I?” he says flatly. “You're fucking nobody.”

Without another word, he turns and exits the room. A few minutes later I hear one last shot.

Chapter 34

July 16, 2023. 1:03 PM.

Turns out that Felipe had sent the guards home early that night. The one who'd been at the gate when I arrived had been the last one left, and he'd gone home as soon as Candi had let me in, on Felipe's instructions. I don't know what had been going through Felipe's head when he told them all to leave. Maybe he thought it would be easier to calm Crowley down in an empty house. Another explanation, one I tend to think is a little more likely, is that on some subconscious level he'd known what was probably going to happen. Maybe his plan all along was for the two of them to die that night. Maybe he'd finally had enough. I certainly know I have.

The cops showed up of course, and naturally I'd been taken into custody as a suspicious person, or a person of interest, or something like that. They'd grilled me for a few hours, and I'd told them what I knew. It was all pretty cut and dry, though. Nobody suspected me of anything, and as it turns out the police had a pretty fair inkling about the sort of arrangement that Felipe and Governor Crowley had had. They kept me overnight, took a formal statement from me in the morning, and sent me on my way. Part of me wonders about what they're going to say when they find the Governor's laptop, but somehow I doubt anything is going to come out of it. It'll get swept under the rug, some other slimeball with their own slimy secrets will become the next Governor, and the world will move on. Same as it ever was.

Getting the car out of the driveway of the Governor's mansion after it had been ruled a crime scene would have been a little complicated, especially since it was his car to begin with, so I decided to let it go and take the bus home. They'll be combing through Crowley's assets and holdings for weeks, and I could probably have kept living in that apartment until someone had found it and kicked me out, but in the end I decided to let that go too. At this point, if I never see the damn place again it will be too soon.

So I stayed there one more night, then gathered up the clothes I'd bought and the money I'd stashed away. I lived pretty cheap when I was in Salem and the apartment was free, so I still had most of the money Felipe had paid me. All in all I'm walking away from this little venture with my freedom and another eight grand in my pocket; you'd think I'd feel pretty good about it, but mostly I just feel angry and deflated. For single, fleeting moment a world of possibility opens in front of me as I try to think about where to go next. I can go anywhere, I realize; be anyone. Almost in the same instant, though, I realize that I have nowhere I want to go, and no one I want to be. So I decide to just catch the next bus back to my own execution.

It's a hot, sunny summer afternoon when the Greyhound pulls into Union Station in Portland. I grab my duffel bag out of the luggage compartment and walk the couple of blocks to where I can catch the train. I ride it out to the Social Security office to pick up a new neetbux card and a new ID and a new government-issue iPhone™.

I have no idea if I've even still got a home. I've been gone for about three months, part of me is wondering if they wouldn't have just thrown out my stuff and given the place to someone else by now. However, when I get to my building, my name is still on the mailbox. I go and check with the building super, tell him my name and my unit number and that I lost my key. I show him my ID. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't even seem to know that I'd been gone, he just hands me a new key and tells me to keep better track of it next time.

I climb the stairs to my floor and open the door to my unit. A musty, moldy, disgusting aroma hits me in the face as soon as I open the door. That damn pizza, or whatever's left of it at this point, is still on the floor, looking like it may have permanently fused into the carpet. I put my suitcase down in the sleeping nook. While I'm there, I check under the bed, expecting to find it gone, but surprisingly enough the envelope with the money that Vel Johnson paid me is still there. Looks like Piney either didn't search the place or didn't consider my little fortune worth taking. I slip it back under the bed along with the money from Felipe and go back into the main room to assess the damage.

The place is still a mess from when Piney attacked me. In addition to the pizza remnants on the floor, the couch has been shoved off to one side of the room, the coffee table knocked over and all of its contents scattered on the floor. I flip the table back over, and begin putting things back as they were. I find a crinkled ten dollar bill underneath a soda can, and I smooth it out and look at it.

“What's that?”

Flutterbutts materializes beside me, examining the money.

“It's a portrait of Hamilton,” I mutter.

I'm half expecting her to launch into some lecture about how money is the opiate of the Capitalist bourgeoisie, but she just stares at the bill for a moment, and then winks back into the aether. I stare at it myself for a few moments more, and then return it to its place on the coffee table.

I can hear Rainbow Darsh whizzing around the room behind me. There's something agitated in her movements, which is usually an alarm bell for me. She's noticed something I haven't yet. Dimly I become aware of a clicking noise that finally registers in my mind as someone picking the lock on my door. Slowly I turn around, just in time to see it swing open. Two black men, a tall one wearing an immaculate white suit and a wide brimmed hat, the other dressed in a bright red Adidas™ tracksuit with a flat top and sunglasses, step into the apartment.

“Wassup, white boy,” says Tyrone Air-Jordan, alias Smoov Macadamia. “What do you say we take a walk?”

I reach down to the floor, where my fedora lay in the same spot it had probably landed when Bigg Piney knocked it off my head. I put it on and give it a quick tip.

“What took you guys so long?” I ask.

Chapter 35

July 16, 2023. 2:13 PM.

Macadamia's Jaguar™ rolls evenly down SE Powell. I stare out the tinted window at stores and commieblock apartments and tent settlements in the high grass of vacant lots, as the scenery goes rolling by. Macadamia himself sits in the backseat next to me, smoking a menthol and watching *Friday* on a little TV screen mounted into the headrest in front of him. Ray Ray McRibb, formerly the manager of Smoov Grooves recording artist Bigg Piney, is in the drivers seat, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel in time with what I recognize as my pilfered David Sanborn album.

We cross 82nd and the scenery starts getting nicer. I keep staring out the window. Macadamia keeps watching *Friday* and periodically chucking at it like a retard. Ray Ray keeps tapping and grooving. Eventually I see the road curving upward into the Ross Island Bridge, and the towers of downtown rising up against the backdrop of green hills. I used to love this drive when I was a kid. I used to pretend it was the ruins of some ancient empire, rising out of a dark and dangerous forest that had grown up around it. We cross the river, but instead of turning onto the freeway as I'd expected we keep going into town, turning onto Naito and heading North.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Macadamia turns and looks at me, an irritated expression on his face. He blows smoke into my eyes and goes back to watching his movie.

Eventually we pull into the parking lot of an old warehouse that had been converted into a nightclub. I know the place; I used to drop people off here all the time. It's called mECHANiX, one of Macadamia's many ventures around town. The club won't open for another few hours, and the lot is completely empty. It's bordered by train tracks on one side and surrounded by vacant lots on all the others. I guess if you're going to kill someone in the middle of the afternoon, this is the kind of place you'd want to do it.

We drive around to the back of the club, where there's nothing but a brick wall on one side and railroad tracks on the other. Macadamia gets out of the car, and Ray Ray comes around to my side and opens the door. The two of them stand there in the hot afternoon sun, grinning at me like hobgoblins.

“You know what comes next,” says Macadamia. “Get down on your knees.”

I do what he says. Macadamia reaches into his jacket, Ray Ray reaches behind him into the waistband of his pants. They both pull out 9mm pistols. I watch them aim them at me with detached fascination. For some reason I'm completely calm. Rainbow Darsh hovers in the air, just between the two of them, looking at me sadly.

“We're not getting out of this one, are we?” she asks. I smile sadly and shake my head, which seems to confuse the two individuals pointing pistols at me. Ray Ray glances quickly in the direction I was looking, but sees nothing. Flutterbutts nuzzles her head against my chest, I give her an affectionate scratch on the wing. We prepare ourselves for the end.

Suddenly, I hear the roar of an engine and the screech of tires, and turn my head to see a black Escalade barreling into the parking lot. It screeches to a halt alongside us, and I see gun barrels sticking out of the windows. Instinctively I drop down flat against the pavement, the hot asphalt burning against my cheek. The other two don't react quite as quickly.

“What the fu--”

Macadamia barely has time to raise his pistol and turn to face the vehicle before gunfire erupts. I hear the sound of automatic weapons being fired. Macadamia drops to the ground in front of me a second later, his immaculate suit ripped with countless holes and stained crimson with blood. His dead eyes stare directly into mine. He never even got a shot off.

I hear Ray Ray's voice shouting obscenities and his 9mm firing. I look up and see him running frantically away towards the train tracks, firing wildly into the air behind him, only to be gunned down an instant later by the mysterious assailants. They fire an extra couple of rounds into the bodies just for good measure, and then they wheel around in the parking lot, tearing off in the same direction from which they'd come. The entire incident had taken less than thirty seconds.

I lie there on the asphalt, breathing heavily. The familiar grip of adrenaline clenches my muscles, painfully contorting my limbs and making my heart pound in my chest. I lie perfectly still, hardly daring even to move for almost a solid minute, but I don't hear the car returning. Suddenly it dawns on me that that much gunfire is going to draw attention, and unless I want to spend another day explaining things to the police, it's probably time for me to make like a tree and get out of here.

I pull myself to my feet in a daze. Already I can hear distant police sirens getting closer. I pause at the door to Macadamia's car for a moment, and reach inside. I press the 'eject' button on his dash-mounted disc player, and take my David Sanborn album back, along with its jewel case which I find in the center console. I hunt around for Herbie Hancock as well, but I don't find him.

“You can't win every fight,” says Rainbow Darsh, materializing suddenly beside me. “Come on, let's get out of here.”

I trot briskly across the parking lot and across the train tracks, in the direction that Ray Ray had been trying to escape to. I cross an empty vacant lot, back onto a street and around the corner just as police cars are beginning to turn into the club's parking lot. I look down at my clothes, worried that I might have been splattered with blood in the altercation, but apart from some dust from the ground I

was lying on I'm all clean. I brush myself off, slip the CD into the pocket of my shorts and duck into a nearby coffee shop.

A black Escalade. Understanding suddenly hits me like a piano being dropped on my head. It all makes perfect sense now.

Chapter 36

July 16, 2023. 8:57 PM.

My Jeep™ pulls to a stop on N Oregon Street. The sun has just finally dipped below the horizon, and the outline of the Nunan House against the purple twilight sky is eerily reminiscent of the fictional haunted mansion it inspired. I approach the foreboding iron gate and press the button for the intercom. I hear no voice on the other end, there's simply silence for a moment, and then the gate clicks open.

I cross the weed-choked yard and clamber up onto the dilapidated porch. The sour-faced, bald-headed old man answers the door, and wordlessly beckons me inside. I glance at a nearby table and see the parts of an uzi laid out, as if it were being cleaned. The guy stares blankly at me, as if daring me to ask him about it. I turn wordlessly and head into the library.

“I thought I might see you tonight.”

Reginald Vel Johnson is sitting in the same place as before, looking just as haggard and miserable as the last time I saw him. A glass of brandy is clutched in his hand, and he gestures to the nearby bottle, asking me if I would like a glass myself. I shake my head, and sit down.

We sit there, staring at each other, neither of us saying a word. Rainbow Darsh floats around his head, making angry faces at him. I'd thought up about a million ways to begin this conversation on the drive down here. Finally, I decide to just come out and say it.

“It was you. It was all you.”

The old man shrugs. His expression doesn't change. He continues to stare at me.

“Not quite sure I understand what you mean, my boy.”

“I drove a long way to get here,” I say measuredly. “I've frankly had a pretty shitty time of it lately. I'd appreciate some honesty from you.”

“All right,” the old man takes a sip of his brandy. “Tell me what it is you'd like to know, and I will answer your questions to the best of my ability.”

“Macadamia wanted to expand his territory,” I say. “He wanted Medford and your routes into California. He figured you were old and finished, so he decided to make a move against you. Governor Crowley was into him for a few million dollars, so he used that as leverage, told him if he used his pull to muscle you out of Oregon he'd cancel the debt, or part of it maybe. So Crowley calls a meeting with the Medford Chief of Police and the Mayor of Portland and probably some other high-up government goons. They go to the Sunset Motel to discuss things, where Macadamia has some 'entertainment' arranged. However, thanks to Crowley's somewhat...excitable nature, the party gets out

of hand, and the girl dies; now there's a murder to complicate things, with a lot of important people that could be implicated.”

The old man smiles thinly and humorlessly.

“As far as I'm aware,” he croaks out in his William Burroughs rasp, “Those events transpired more or less the way you described them.”

“There's a lot of big names in that room,” I continue. “A lot of people with the power to make trouble go away. A dead hooker in a motel room isn't that hard to get rid of for people like that, normally. But it turns out this girl wasn't just some hooker, she was actually someone important. Someone they couldn't just vanish.”

The old man's expression darkens, but he says nothing.

“So they needed to pin it on someone. Her husband was a drunk. She cheated on him constantly, and when she got bored with that she started turning tricks for Macadamia. She didn't even need the money, she just did it for kicks. She made a fool out of him; anyone with half a brain could see motive there. He was perfect to take the fall. Or at least he would have been, if something hadn't happened first.”

The old man finishes his brandy and pours himself another glass. He never stops looking at me the whole time. The emptiness in his eyes chills me straight to the bone. Dimly I'm aware that his right-hand, the old guy with the shaved head, has entered the room at some point, and is now standing near the doorway, his arms folded, holding a revolver somewhat conspicuously. I can't stop myself from talking, though; I've come all this way and I need to see this through to the end.

“Someone tipped off the husband. Someone sent him photos of his wife's body and told him he was going to be framed for the murder. That gave him just enough time to skip town before the hammer fell, and that made things complicated for Crowley and the others. And that brings up an interesting question: who would want to do something like that? It would have to be someone who knew what happened, someone who was able to get close enough to the scene of the crime to get pictures of it, and who would also have an interest in throwing a monkey wrench into the group's plans.”

“Perhaps a well-intentioned police detective?” the old man says dryly.

I snort at that.

“Turns out,” I say, “Someone saw a black Escalade pull up outside the motel room that night, after everyone else left. A guy went in, stayed for about fifteen minutes, then took off.”

The old man takes a sip of brandy.

“Who do you think it was?” he asks. I hear the enforcer behind me take a couple of steps

forward.

“I don't know,” I say. “I guess I've got no way of knowing for sure. I'd say it was the same guy that took the pictures and tipped off the husband.”

“That seems like a fair assumption.”

“It also stands to reason that he'd have to be someone with a motivation to screw up this deal between Macadamia and the Governor, like I said. He also would have to have known to be at that particular motel, at that particular time, in order to get those pictures of the murder before even the police knew about it. He was probably someone who had a reason to keep tabs on that particular girl and knew her whereabouts, knew that it would be her in that room and not just some random whore. Someone who knew the temperament of Governor Crowley and had an inkling of what might go down that night if he happened to do a little too much blow.”

“Someone who simply noticed an opportunity and took action,” the old man says, his face an emotionless dead mask.

“Yeah,” I say. “Someone like that. Probably the same kind of person who'd hire a dumb sap to act as a decoy and flush out his enemy, then send in a hit squad as soon as the enemy popped his head up. A guy like that would have everything sewed up in a nice little package, if he could pull off a stunt like that.”

We stare at each other in silence for a few seconds. The bald guy behind me clears his throat.

“I'd imagine the 'dumb sap' in that scenario would be fairly well compensated for his role,” the old man says finally.

“You could imagine anything you want.”

I don't say anything else. The old man doesn't seem like he's in much of a talkative mood either.

“So will that be all, Mr. Fedora?” he asks finally.

“Yeah, that's all.” I stand to leave. “Looks like you came out on top after everything's said and done. Macadamia's gone, pretty soon you'll have a new Governor to play ball with. You can take over the whole state now if you want. And all it cost you was a daughter.”

“I lost my daughter a long time ago,” he says. His voice sounds empty, and unbelievably tired.

As I turn to go, I see that the bald-headed guy has moved in closer, and has his revolver pointed at me. Just waiting for a signal from the old man, I'll bet.

“Put that damn thing away,” I snap at him. “I'm tired of having guns pointed at me. Either shoot me or don't.”

I walk out the door, and leave Mr. Vel Johnson to his castle of vapor.

Chapter 37

October 12, 2023. 7:18 PM.

Rain beats against my windshield. The wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. New Age jazz music toots pleasantly out of the speaker. “Appaloosa” by Davol, from his 1999 album *Open Book*. Designated Problematic in March of 2022 for reasons of Extreme Homophobic Content in what later proved to be a misunderstanding, designation removed a month later. Currently available on iTunes™.

It's a slow night. I've had a few fares but between fuel and the meal I bought earlier I'm probably well in the red at this point. I don't mind, though. I drive around for a little while longer, enjoying my music and the tranquility of driving on a slow, rainy night. Finally, I switch off the Uber™ app and head for home.

I cruise east on Burnside, watching rainy streets and tent villages and hipster condos fly past. I hit 82nd and turn south, then turn back east again. I stop at the corner store on my way back, and pick up some Hot Pockets™ and a 2 liter of Mountain Dew™. Rainbow Darsh and Flutterbutts stare disapprovingly at me as I pay the cashier. I promised them a month ago I'd start eating healthier food, and I fully intend to make good on that promise. I'll start tomorrow. Maybe the day after. That's what I said yesterday and the day before, but this time I mean it.

I open the door to my apartment.

“Tadaima!” I call out, to nobody in particular.

Rainbow Darsh sighs heavily. Flutterbutts giggles.

I microwave my Hot Pockets™, crack open the Dew™, and throw some mindless comfy anime on the TV. The poners snuggle up next to me on the couch. Rain drums softly on the windows outside. I eat my Hot Pockets™. I drink my Mountain Dew™.

It occurs to me that I haven't checked my email in a while. The hosting fee was due on my PI business website last month. After careful consideration, I decided to just let it lapse, and the site is offline now. Because of that, I find it even less likely than usual that someone will have emailed me about detective work, but old habits die hard. I grab my laptop off the coffee table. As I lift it something falls to the floor, and I lean down to pick it up. It's a crinkled ten dollar bill that has been sitting there since time out of mind. I stare at it for a second, then return it to its familiar place on the table, then I open my laptop and start skimming emails.

I read through the list. A Democrat named Triana Vogel is running for Governor. She vows that she will step up and fill the shoes of the late, great Governor Malcolm Crowley, but she needs my

donation to do it. Apparently she's counting on me, and only me, to help get her past that donation threshold that will allow her to become the Governor that Oregon needs. Meanwhile, my old friend the penis-enlarger has a special offer that's only good for the next twenty four hours. I'll need to act fast if I would like to have my penis enlarged at these special low low prices.

My hand pauses over a strange message. The username is gibberish, the domain is a familiar proxy mail service on the Dark Web. No subject. I frown, and open the email.

“Tips,” the message reads, “Hope you're doing ok. I've been keeping up on the news, if you have too you might have heard that I was killed in Hong Kong. I wasn't!!! Sorry I would have let you know sooner but I wanted to let shit die down a little first, for all I know the cops are still looking for me. Anyway I figure as long as I'm 'dead' there should be nothing for either of us to worry about anymore. Just wanted to let you know that I'm ok. I'm happy out here. I met a girl. She's got a kid and she won't let me drink anymore which kind of sucks, but it's going pretty good so far otherwise. Anyway, just wanted to let you know all of that. I think I'll do ok out here. Best of luck to you. Also, please don't look for me. Delet this when you're done reading.”

There's a photo attached. It's a picture of Elroy, at some temple in China with his Asian waifu and her little daughter. He's doing that ridiculous open-mouthed smile that he always does in pictures. He even wrote a timestamp on a piece of paper and held it up when the picture was taken so I'd know it was real. Guy knows me pretty well it would seem.

I stare at the photo for a few moments, absent mindedly scratching Flutterbutts behind the ears as she snuggles her imaginary head contentedly in my lap. I'll never understand the appeal of 3D women, especially not funny-looking ones from other countries who don't even have hooves, but her kid's cute enough I guess, and the three of them look happy together. I'm glad for him.

I spend a few more moments looking at the photo, then I save it to my hard drive and delete the message as requested. I close the laptop and put it back where it was. I notice the ten dollar bill again, sitting on the coffee table, a lonely portrait of Alexander Hamilton staring forlornly up at the ceiling. After a moment's thought, I snatch it up and put it in my pocket.

“Hey,” I say. The poners look up. “Those Hot Pockets™ didn't really do much for me. I think I'm going to run out and grab something else.”

“Why don't you try something with nutrients in it?” says Rainbow Darsh.

“Why don't you try eating my ass?” I say pleasantly. “Come on. I feel like a footlong meatball sub from Subway™.”

The poners follow me out the door.