

the rails

a novel

kris kemp
with graham schofield

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CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| PROLOGUE..... | 9 |
| THE WORLD BENEATH..... | 19 |
| WATCHERS | 25 |
| THE OUTSIDER | 34 |
| ASSAULT AND ROBBERY..... | 59 |
| THE SECRET DOOR..... | 69 |
| GREGORY'S APPOINTMENT..... | 77 |
| JILL'S DILEMMA..... | 88 |
| THE EVENT | 110 |
| AFTERMATH..... | 122 |
| FRUSTRATION..... | 135 |
| UNDER SURVEILLANCE..... | 141 |
| COMPLICATIONS | 147 |
| CAUSE AND EFFECT..... | 159 |
| RENDEZVOUS | 168 |
| DIFFERENT AGENDAS | 177 |
| A THOUSAND WORDS..... | 187 |

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| INTO THE TUNNEL | 192 |
| THE MUSE AND THE MUSIC..... | 195 |
| RAMPAGE..... | 204 |
| SOME KIND OF ARRANGEMENT..... | 209 |
| FAMOUS ON YOUTUBE..... | 216 |
| FALLOUT | 225 |
| INCESSANT | 232 |
| TOGRUL'S NIGHT OUT | 238 |
| A SIGN..... | 258 |
| INTERVENTION..... | 280 |
| A SECRET REVEALED | 289 |
| THE MISSION..... | 300 |
| SUBWAY SHOWDOWN..... | 319 |
| RUNAWAY TRAIN..... | 333 |
| AFTERMATH | 340 |
| REVELATIONS..... | 358 |

“I feel sorry for them in their dirty pot houses. I feel sorry for me feeling sorry for plants that can’t think about a place they’ve never been, where people smile because they’re never cold, those plants can’t miss a life they’ve never known.”

MEGHAN HURLEY (EQUATORIAL CRAVINGS)

“... how can I speak of the world rushing by with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes ...”

A-HA (THE SWING OF THINGS)

“A pain stabbed my heart, as it did every time I saw a girl I loved who was going the opposite direction in this too-big world.”

JACK KEROUAC (ON THE ROAD)

“I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and a chance to sacrifice myself for love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life.”

LEO TOLSTOY (FAMILY HAPPINESS)

“By the night, in a warm shoe, something that looked like a piece of dirt turned into a beautiful butterfly. She had sparkling vibrant wings and breeze of freedom in front of her, that’s all she had.”

MARIAN VOLKAVA

(THE BUTTERFLY AND THE ELEPHANT)

“He could say nothing. He had no right to be there, he had already been profoundly changed, he was not good at small talk, she was half naked, it was dawn, and he loved her.”

MARK HELPRIN (WINTER'S TALE)

“The advantage of a communal life is that you belong to a new society, if this could be called a society – you live in it, talk in it, become part of it. There are so many things to say, to hear and to do that you no longer have time to think.”

HENRI CHARRIERE (PAPILLON)

PROLOGUE

EVERY CITY has its secrets. Even New York City.

Along with the recorded history of the New York City subway system, there is also a hidden history, one that has been unmentioned of until now.

Years before the subway was built, Alfred Ely Beach, an American inventor, publisher, and patent lawyer developed a pneumatic subway line beneath Broadway, in Manhattan. Nothing like this had ever been done beneath the streets of New York City. In order to put his idea into motion, Beach began the project, Beach Pneumatic Transit Company, by claiming he was building postal tubes—pneumatic tubes for the transport of letters and packages. Inspired by the underground Metropolitan Railway in London, Beach believed enough in his idea to fund the entire project himself, at a cost of \$350,000 dollars. This was an enormous sum of money in 1869, the year construction began on the project.

Fifty-eight days later, the project was completed. The result: a single tunnel 312 feet long and eight feet in diameter that ran under Broadway from Warren Street to Murray Street. The line opened to curious fanfare. During its first week, the Beach Pneumatic Transit sold over 11,000 rides, with 400,000 rides during its first year. The twenty-five cent admission went to charity.

Beach hoped that his line would garner enough enthusiasm to support a bigger line, in order to get public funding. The public was enthusiastic, but official obstruction caused delays. In 1873, by the time he gained permission to build a bigger tunnel, support for the project had ameliorated. Eventually, the existing tunnel was shut down, the entrance sealed, and the tunnel swallowed up into other purposes.

Rumor has it that in the original journals of Alfred Ely Beach, something caught his eye, and curiosity, during the first month of construction of the tunnel. This incident was significant enough to warrant a journal entry among his meticulous notes, most of which document the technical details and difficulties of his mission to establish the first subway line. The journal notes, recovered from his great-great grandson, William Beach, are revealed here for the first time.

July 9, 1869

Hot. During the blasting of the tunnel earlier today, saw hundreds of rats take shelter into their holes, moments before the blast. How do they know? Perhaps God has given them this intuition in order to survive. Following the blast, a portion of the tunnel had an opening that led further down. Using a sledgehammer, I widened it, then made the descent, with cable rope. It was lunchtime and I was alone.

For one hundred feet, I made the descent through the narrow space. Then, a rush of frigid air came up from below, as the opening widened into a large cavern. At this point, I was out of rope, so I could descend no further. I heard sounds, like that of animals scurrying. I aimed my lamp downward. I saw four figures, running to an entrance in the cave below. They looked human. They were slim and their skin was very pale, almost translucent. One looked at me with his eyes wide appearing to be astonished. But when he looked at me, I could feel his thoughts. He was curious. It was like looking into the eyes of a child.

I was shaking. I dropped the lamp and it fell to the ground and shattered, casting me in darkness once more. I was scared and made my ascent hastily. Although I was hungry and thirsty at the time, I had not been drinking, nor was I dreaming. I decided it best not to mention this

to anyone, as any queer behavior might prohibit me from getting the funds and public support necessary for this project.

After lunch, I sealed the opening. Before doing so, I took details of its location, from the north entrance of the pneumatic transit tunnel. Below is a sketch of what I saw when I was down there.

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■ ■ ■ ■ ■

ACCORDING TO great-great-grandson William Beach, who shared this information, Alfred Ely Beach had no history of telling tall tales or even simple exaggeration. Nor was he known to drink to the point of succumbing to fanciful imaginations. William believes the story is true.

Years later, in the 1910s, the Beach Subway—the tunnel and passenger ferry constructed by the Beach Pneumatic Transit Company—was demolished when the BMT Broadway Line was built. In 1904, the first underground line of the subway opened, which became the IRT Ninth Avenue Line. By this time, the subway consisted of two privately owned systems—the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (BRT), later Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation, BMT) and the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT). In 1940, the two private systems were bought up by the city. In 1953, the New

York Transit Authority (NYTA) was created to take over subway, bus, and streetcar operations. In 1968, the NYTA was placed under control of the state-level Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA).

April 1944

IN 1944, a year after the end of World War II, thousands of men and women who had previously worked in military service, moved to New York City. The city represented opportunity. These military servicemen wanted to find work in the civilian sector and start families of their own. One such GI was Henry Person, who, during World War II, had served as radio specialist in the Bravo Charlie Company.

In August of 1944, Person and his fiancée, Grace McGonway, moved to New York City. Person got a job working construction with the Transport Workers Union of America (TWUA). At the time, the TWUA was expanding the #1 subway line tunnel, between Canal and Franklin Streets. Person was in charge of radio communications, and was, often, the first person to enter the tunnels, following blasting procedures, in order to establish communications.

In early October of 1944, following a tunnel-blast, Person entered the south end of the #1 subway tunnel, near the Franklin Street entrance. An explosion was heard

from Person's radio and then communication went dead. After air levels were checked, the construction team entered the tunnel. They discovered that, thirty yards from the entrance, the tunnel had collapsed. A secondary explosion due to a natural gas buildup was blamed.

Search efforts were initiated, but time consuming and difficult due to the dangerous conditions. Person was not found. His fiancée, Grace McGonway, was sick with grief. So sick, in fact, that she lost ten pounds in two weeks. With the help of a doctor friend, she eventually found solace, believing that Henry had died quickly without struggle or pain. By the third week, Grace, fearing the worst, began preparing funeral arrangements for the following weekend. On Tuesday, the third week of his disappearance, Grace McGonway received a phone call at 4 a.m. It was Henry Person. He wanted to meet her.

"I was ecstatic. That's how I felt. He was the love of my life," remembers McGonway, in an interview that took place years later. "At the same time, I was surprised and curious as to why he hadn't contacted me sooner."

They met a half-hour later at a diner in the East Village, a few blocks from where they rented a third floor walk-up apartment.

"When I first saw him, we hugged and both cried and cried. I kissed him and his face was cold. He seemed happy, but there was something different about him. Something had changed. He looked pale and thin, and

his eyes looked as if he had lived for hundreds of years, accumulating secrets of the ancients. I asked him where he had been for two weeks, why he had not contacted me. He told me an elaborate story, of how he had woken up in an underground cavern. That he was surrounded by people that looked like us, except they were thin and muscular, and had large eyes. And they communicated with their thoughts. When he said that, I thought, he must've dreamed it.

"That he had gone unconscious for a few days, lost track of time. He told me that he saw what he saw, and that didn't he want to go back to our world. He wanted me to join him, to live underground, with the cave people. That we could help them."

Her story continued. "I was hysterical. Here I was, sitting across from the love of my life, and he was telling me that he'd met these creatures who live in caves, and that he was going to go live with them. And he didn't plan to return. He was inviting me, but I was scared and didn't even know who I was talking to, because I thought he'd lost his mind.

"He said that I had to come with him, right now, and be there before 9 a.m., or they would seal off the entrance to their cave, and I would have no way to find them again. He was begging me to come. I told him that I would need more time to think about it. He said it wasn't possible. That was the last that I ever saw of him. Despite

the fact that a body was not recovered, we arranged a funeral. On his tombstone epithet, I had this written, 'He found another world.'

"I told a few close friends. One of them mentioned it to others and I was ridiculed behind my back. After that, I decided not to tell anyone else. Except for now. Because, at this point in my life, it doesn't matter what people think of me. I know what happened. And I'm telling the truth.

"I married two years later. We had children and started a new life together. I never told my husband, or my kids. I didn't see the point. New memories would pave over my past memories, until my time with Henry was just a puzzle piece in the big picture of my life. Still, I knew Henry would be okay. He was capable and strong. He had survived the war. I knew that Henry was still alive and would be fine. I knew that Henry would be okay. So, I knew not to worry about him."

October 1982

IN OCTOBER 1982, Henry Moody, a subway conductor working the overnight shift for the L train that runs from Brooklyn to Manhattan, reported seeing something strange. According to the report, which was made in his log and given to management, he saw a man running ahead of the train. The man outran the train, and then disappeared from view as the tunnel made its descent.

“Pale. Shirtless. Running very fast. Like an animal.” These are the words used to describe what he saw. “He outran my train.”

This happened as the L train charged west from the Bedford Avenue (Brooklyn) stop toward its next stop at First Avenue in Manhattan. In his log, Moody noted that he saw the man, whom he described as “thin and creature like,” for only a few seconds, until it outran the light of the train. “I’ve never seen anything run so fast in my whole life.”

After his report was made known among other subway conductors, additional sightings came trickling in. Stories were shared in quiet conversations among Metropolitan Transit Authority workers. All of the sightings were similar in nature: A subway conductor, working late night shift, would see a slim-looking person running across the tracks, and disappearing into a wall, or running ahead of the train at a tremendous speed. The viewing would only last for seconds. These stories were passed along to higher-ups at the Metropolitan Transit Authority. MTA officials conducted interviews and concluded the sightings to be caused by lack-of-sleep or hallucinations caused by the repetitiveness of constantly staring ahead into the subway tunnel. Eventually, among certain subway personnel, the sightings became known as the Subway Sasquatch.

When requested for details about the hidden history

of the New York City subway system, particularly the stories that were detailed above, the Metropolitan Transit Authority refused to confirm or deny their existence. Several requests for verification went unanswered. Since then, these stories, shared among longtime Metropolitan Transit Authority subway conductors, have become an urban legend.

Until now.

THE WORLD BENEATH

Present day.

HE WAS being watched.

The subway train rumbled off into the tunnel. The last echo of the wheels on-the-track finally receded, bringing silence to the station once more. 1:53 a.m. The lone pedestrian, a middle-aged executive who had just arrived, stood nervously on the platform. The lights of the last car faded to leave only the black hole beneath the curved roof.

A gust of wind, entering from the mouth of the subway two stops north, gained strength and intensity, until it reached its destination at the approaching platform. The cold wind swept ferociously into the station, pushing a single sheet of the New York Times across the platform.

The executive jumped as the newspaper's cover flew past him. He glanced at the rustle behind him. The single sheet settled beneath a wooden bench like a drunk collapsed into a corner. The executive, a well-dressed,

well-paid insurance adjustor, looked around nervously. He removed his designer glasses, pulling a tissue from his left pocket to wipe them. This time of night, the subway crowd was the flotsam and jetsam of society—the drunks, drug addicts, homeless, criminals, partygoers, and a handful of nightshift workers.

“The next train to South Ferry will be arriving in eleven minutes,” a titanium sounding voice echoed from the speakers. Nearby, an electronic sign, posting the times for the next train, indicated the eleven-minute wait time.

He ran through the statistics in his mind of being robbed by some thugs with nothing to lose. He thought of the pen in his jacket pocket, wondering if he would use it to stab someone in self-defense. He half-smiled, catching himself quickly, almost laughing at the thought. Typically, he didn’t entertain such scenarios. Tonight, this early morning actually, he felt as if he is being watched. Years in the field, determining risks and varying insurance rates according to those assessments, had given him reason to trust his senses. He bounced on his expensive Florsheim shoes and glanced at his phone, then the railway tunnel. He sighed, muttering something under his breath. With a purposeful stride, he made his way toward the exits.

The twenty-two dollar cab fee will be worth my peace of mind, he thought. *Besides*, he reasoned, *it’s a business expense*. He jogged the stairwell, disappearing from view. He was correct in his assessment. He was being watched.

From twenty-five yards away, in the darkness of the subway tunnel, the watchers had been observing him. Had his eyesight been as clear and as sharp as theirs, the businessman would have seen a pair of eyes glowing in the darkness. These eyes remained still, fixed in place. They shone a brilliant green and yellow, like the eyes of a cat catching the ambient light in its path.

The eyes held their position, seeking out danger and, more importantly, ensuring that all the humans had gone. Contact was entirely forbidden.

At least five minutes after the man had left, the pair of eyes moved from the darkness of the tunnel. A second pair of eyes followed, moving along the same lines as if connected by wires. They had come to scavenge the platforms for anything left behind by the humans after the trains had gone for the day.

The night was theirs.

The darkness was theirs.

It was against the rules for them to be here, but these two watchers preferred to live outside of the rules, at least on a night like this.

The smaller of the two was Togrul, who moved like a puma in the wild. Every movement, even his gestures, was pronounced. When he walked, every part of his body moved. His legs were strong, his arms veiny, his face scarred, his hands calloused, his hair cut short and covered with dust. Despite being only twenty-years-old,

he had the rough exterior of a mid-thirties construction worker, except he was not tan or even sunburned.

His skin was pale, so much so that from a distance, he appeared translucent. And his eyes were enormous, appearing to be the size of silver dollars. The color of his eyes could be best described as a kaleidoscope, as they shifted from green to yellow, depending on the light. He had a commanding presence that made him appear taller than his height of five foot eight.

Behind him, with one hand resting on a vertical steel beam, one of the supporting columns that ran alongside the tracks, stood Ben. He was the taller of the two by a few inches. He was skinny to the point of being emaciated. He looked as if he'd just lost a fight. His face was covered with fresh bruises. His shirt was ripped. A cut ran along his ear, covered with dried, caked blood.

His eyes shifted restlessly and he fidgeted with his free hand, rubbing his palm as if there was lotion in it. He was covered in grime and dirt. Like Togrul, he was pale and had big eyes. He sniffed the air, glanced into the subway tunnel, and looked at Togrul, waiting for a signal. It was clear from his restless demeanor, like a schoolboy waiting for permission to use the restroom, that Togrul was the leader of the two.

Togrul and Ben watched from their position inside the darkness of the subway tunnel. The sound of fast moving footsteps grew louder, coming from the stairs leading

into the subway. Voices echoed off the tiled walls. A group of friends, twenty-something hipsters, descended the steps and walked toward the platform. One of them talked loudly, while the others listened. By the time they arrived, the watchers were gone. Togrul and Ben were already an eighth of a mile deep into the subway tunnel, running at tremendous speeds, to see who could make it first to the world beneath.

While the group of friends talked and laughed, they remained unaware that, just moments earlier, people of a different origin had stood a mere twenty-five yards from their current position. The main talker, a self-assured plump girl, wearing wedges and skinny jeans, blathered. The others nodded, inserting words where they could, while checking their Facebook statuses to tally the number of likes for the pictures they had tagged themselves in earlier that night. They were so self-absorbed in their conversation that had these watchers kept their position, they would not have noticed.

What little is known about these watchers has been passed down mainly through stories, in whispered conversations in private rooms behind locked doors. Some of these stories were shared by older people who have nothing left to lose, who, at this feel compelled to unload the burden of their experience before they leave this life for the next. They want to pass on the story to someone who will listen.

For all people, especially the elderly, attention remains the rarest commodity. And those who listen, without judgment or prejudice, position themselves to receive the secrets, secrets worth more than gold. This story is based on their stories, compiled from hundreds of hours of interviews, eyewitness accounts, and testimonies. The names and places have been changed in order to protect the identities of those involved. Here is their story.

WATCHERS

DEEP IN the musty caverns beneath Manhattan, steel beams crisscross, connecting with each other like spider webs, arching over the subway tracks, protecting the subway tunnels from the weight of the world above. They are a magnificent rusting ribcage, riveted and welded together to connect the serpentine, hollow pathways that twist and turn through the five boroughs of New York City. Millions of people ride the subway to and from work each day. The common term for subway riders is straphangers, referring to the looped straps that used to hang from subway car ceilings, used for passengers to hold onto while riding the subway. 1969 was the last year subway cars featured straps. Currently, subway cars have poles for this purpose.

Most fail to notice that the subway itself provides a living for the people who work the rails and that it is teeming with life. Metropolitan Transit Authority

workers earn their bread by working the subway. They maintain the line, maintain the tunnels, and navigate their human cargo through these underground passageways. And sometimes, they clean.

Rats, hundreds of thousands of them, maybe millions of them, call the subway their home, surviving off the food scraps left behind by careless travelers. With teeth that can chew through steel, they burrow tunnels and live in colonies, behind the subway walls. Using their instincts to survive, the rodents have a hierarchy that enables them to maintain a sense of order.

Even the homeless have a home within the subway. For them, the neglected spaces, those hard to get to, abandoned subway stations and forgotten empty areas operate like a self-service squatter's hotel for long-term stay. The homeless who live deep underground are known as "the moles."

But all of them—the subway riders, the Metropolitan Transit Authority workers, the homeless, even the moles—have no clue about the race of people, numbering in the thousands, that have existed and, despite their circumstances, survived for hundreds of years.

The straphangers, the transit workers, the homeless, and the moles know the rats. Yet, only the rats know of Togrul and the others of his race. But they will not tell.

The New York City subway system is home to more than just humankind and rodents. There's another city

beneath this first city's underground rail system that has always gone unnoticed, indeed totally unknown. In the darkest of caverns, deep below the subway, lives this other race of people. They are the watchers. Although they resemble humans, they have special powers that have enabled them to thrive in their underground environment.

They can see in the dark.

They have superhuman hearing.

They can run at superhuman speeds.

They can leap great heights and distances.

They can scale buildings.

They have superhuman strength.

They number in the thousands.

They have carved out dwellings and shelters for themselves and their families. Children are schooled in the traditions of the race by stories passed down over the centuries. However, nothing is written. Everything is committed to memory, to be stored away in the minds of these people. They all have total recall of everything they hear and see. While the intelligence of these people could not be described as superhuman, it is, as reflected by their total recall, extremely high. This is just as it would likely be for a human with the power of a photographic memory.

The young ones learn from a very early age that contact with humans is totally prohibited by the laws of the race. The children learn of the existence of the humans, but the

knowledge imparted is kept to a minimum. The influences of the humans, their evil morals and decadent ways, must be kept from those living below ground. It is known to a few that much good could be learned that could have a positive impact, but the dangers of corruption are seen as too great.

Of the entire race, only three of their kind who are allowed to break this taboo; three who are selected to serve until death, sworn to secrecy to reveal none of their interactions with humans to their fellow people. The reason for the exception for these three is they trade the precious metals and minerals that are mined from deep underground caves. The trading generates all the required provisions for the race.

In their environment, there is little use for some of the aforementioned special powers. While they could be called superhuman powers, the people of this race would deem them ordinary, for they are born with them. Heredity has built such things into the race for one reason alone—to protect them from humans should the need arise. These rarely used powers are for avoidance and escape if contact should happen. Additionally, they can leap great heights and great distances and would easily scale the tallest of buildings. One power they do use in their work in the mines is their superhuman strength.

Most of the watchers have the same physical build—a petite height of five foot nine and under, very thin with

strong arms, backs, and legs, and enormous eyes that enable them to see in the dark and, when focused, to see far distances as if they were close up. Their ability to focus is similar to a binocular's point of view that enables a viewer to zoom in on an object, person, or place.

For hundreds of years, the clan has long held the same ways and traditions, the social mores of their forefathers. In recent times, though, things have started to change. Quietly, a small rebellion had begun to take root.

Some of the younger people of the race have, through the discarded newspapers and magazines abandoned by the subway travelers every day, taught themselves to read and understand the human tongue. Learning the ways of the above world triggered their curiosity. Due to their ability to remember and their photographic memory, learning, for them, creates an endorphin rush, a kind of natural high. And once they tasted a little bit of knowledge, having absorbed it so quickly, they immediately crave more. Many of the adolescent watchers become addicted to knowledge of the human world.

Before this occurrence, watchers remained happy and satisfied with their lives among their own race. But the knowledge of the above world, by the insatiably curious watchers, created a dissatisfaction, hunger, void, and desire among them. This dissatisfaction was taking root between two groups of people, most of them comprised of their teens or early twenties.

The first group was made up of the electronics enthusiasts, those who constructed computers from discarded electronics. Due to their skills, these watchers were likely to run the accounting and supply side records for the clan. These tasks consisted of inventory, distribution, shipping, and receiving of goods and merchandise and records of everything necessary to keep the clan running smoothly.

The second group was made up of the travelers, those that explored the far reaches of the caves. The travelers were physically strong and known for being a mischievous, adventuresome bunch, unruly and wild and unpredictable. According to rumors, some of the travelers had explored the world above, which was strictly prohibited by the clan. In order to become a traveler, one had to undergo an initiation that involved defending oneself against five other travelers, in a physical confrontation. Some of the travelers had scars that they displayed proudly as badges of fearlessness.

The language of the caves beneath could never really be mastered and understood by humans. Physically, the internal mouth construct of the watchers was significantly different from that of the humans. Also, the complexity of their sounds was indecipherable to anyone except those of their own race. Even the most well studied linguist would need the assistance of a computer. And even with the help of a computer, since the language has never been written down, this would take years.

Some of the more scientifically inclined watchers had begun assembling computers, by foraging through bins for discarded electronics. Despite the antiquated parts, the sapient watchers rigged the pieces to have Internet capabilities, enabling them to study the goings-on of the above world. These computers, dismissed as junk had they seen by people of the above world, fetched a small fortune in barter value in the world below.

Out of both of these groups, the travelers had become the more exclusive because of its initiation ritual and the danger involved during its intelligence gathering missions. In spite of the risk, the travellers group was revered by other members of the clan. Although, technically no leader has been named, Togrul was the *de facto* leader. His courage in exploring new places, even to the point of great physical risk, earned him the unofficial title.

This night, Togrul had planned to gather old newspapers scattered amidst the subway tunnels. This was usually a twice-weekly routine, done mid-week in the early morning hours. Ben, a fresh recruit in the travellers gang, begged to come along. Reluctantly, but annoyed by his incessant whining, Togrul agreed.

Earlier in the night, Togrul had reached for the sheet of newspaper when, instantly, a gust of wind carried it away. It was this same sheet of newspaper that flew past the waiting businessman, startling him, before landing underneath the bench directly behind him.

Togrul, and those who became his followers, found himself at the heart of wanting to reject the centuries old laws and culture. Seeing only benefits, Togrul and the others wanted to embrace humankind and all that their ways and lifestyles offer. Among their ranks, a small rebellion had been taking root and Togrul had been the one most vociferous about this. Couple this with his natural personality that draws people to him and the leader had been born.

Unlike those born into their position, Togrul did not come from a grand place in the order of things. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Togrul was simply a twenty-year-old mine worker. With the naturally, almost pure white skin of his people, he had a slim but muscular frame, jet-black hair, and was only about five-foot-eight in height. However, his muscular limbs showed that he'd been working the mines for years and the scars on his face revealed that he's fought his way to become an assistant supervisor. Despite his rough exterior, his smile, as rare as it is, revealed a boyish charm that had been one of his attractions for the others who shared his views on their future.

Although the race remained essentially a family unit, it was, like many others, still a family. And as such, certain members were more familiar than others with strains and struggle. Some members mastered a basic understanding of the human tongue, yet they remained unaware of the

trouble, caused unknowingly by Togrul, brewing among their ranks.

With his actions, bravado, and general belligerence, Togrul, in his unpredictability and unfailing confidence, became the ideal candidate for the movement, one that promised adventure and freedom from the restraints of a culture that held them down. His oratory skills—sharp, inflammatory, and without apology—ignited a spark among the dry tinder in his midst. His words were remembered and shared among his the community. His speeches were remembered and repeated. As his ideals were brokered by others in the community, his followers increased, so much so that his reputation proceeded him. Being a follower offered them a sense of camaraderie, adventure, and acceptance. Togrul, however, had no intention of starting a community. His disregard for organization left spaces for managers, who were his most loyal followers, to fill the ranks, and organize the group.

Although the group of followers answered the needs of the restless-and-impetuous, there were a few outsiders that watched from afar. Reluctant to join the followers, but also disillusioned by the traditions of the elders, they kept to themselves, occupying their free time with personal activities. One of these outsiders, the least well-known among the unknowns, was Egan.

THE OUTSIDER

FOR AS long as he could remember, Egan felt like an outsider among as his own race. In his early years, he was teased and ridiculed, even bullied, for being so quiet. To survive, he kept to himself. At age 12, he taught himself to play piano. Because he had not been given lessons, his playing was rudimentary. Despite its simplicity, the music was beautiful. Playing gave his thoughts, often muddled in discouragement and turmoil, a kind of outlet. Moving his fingers across the keyboard and striking the notes proved cathartic, offering him a means of self-expression that would have otherwise been neglected.

In order to fit in, he had feigned interest in activities that were popular like playing games and fighting, but at age sixteen, everything changed. Instead of doing what was expected of him, he did something different.

Similar to other cultures, the watchers had a rite of passage for young men. For any sixteen-year-old male

within his culture, an initiation took place. On their sixteenth birthday, a male would undergo an attack by five other males within a sixteen to eighteen-year-old range. The ability to defend oneself asserted his position on the food chain that year, in terms of respect, popularity, and opportunity within the clan of watchers. Typically, the victim of these attacks would fight, protect themselves through some kind of barter, or both of these.

It was the day of Egan's sixteenth birthday when he was attacked, unexpectedly, while walking alone. Instead of defending himself, as was standard, or covering himself to prevent physical injury, Egan ran. Puzzled and furious, the attackers chased him. Egan, however, was extremely fast, so fast that the attackers, after five minutes, tired and out of breath, gave up their pursuit. Up until this point, Egan had been unaware of his speed, his ability to run. From that day on, Egan continued running a few nights a week. Late at night, when most of the clan was asleep, he would run the myriad of tunnels, getting faster and faster each time. These tunnels, carved out by watchers hundreds of years earlier, were used as a transportation hub during the working hours. From 10:00 p.m. until 8:00 a.m., they were unused and empty. They became Egan's personal running track. Egan found running to be cathartic, a way for him to dismiss the excess thoughts that permeated his brain, a way for him to outrun his insecurities.

On the outside, Egan looked like the others. He was

pale, petite, and had large eyes. On the inside, though, Egan was different. He knew he was different, but how or why he knew that was a mystery to him. His thoughts caged him in a prison of introspection. To protect himself, he became laconic. Others, unable to see past the outside, misinterpreted his introvert nature as one of arrogance.

Because he had grown up with no books to look to read or look at, Egan began to master the human tongue by reading the discarded newspapers and magazines found near the abandoned subway stations. He was fascinated by the pictures. He had yet to understand how an image could be taken and frozen as a moment in time as if the world had suddenly stopped moving.

On Egan's seventeenth birthday, his dad, Armon, an engine repair worker, gave him a gift. Two boxes. In the first box, a battered 35mm Canon AE-1 camera lay in a nest of newspaper, a 70-210mm zoom lens right beside it.

Egan lifted the camera slowly from its cradle of ripped newspaper, turning it over, and examining it carefully as if it were a precious diamond. The camera body was dented and scratched, with the F-stop numbers worn and barely visible. The camera had been places. Whoever had used the camera had stories to tell. Lacerations and scrapes covered the camera, like the scars of someone who'd been whipped. The imperfections converted this metal instrument into a living calendar, one with a history all its own. He uncapped the lens cap. The lens was pristine.

"It's not a fragile antique glass," his dad said.

Egan turned it over in his hands. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

In the second box, rolls and rolls of film, some color, most of it black-and-white, 3200 speed, ideal for shooting in low-light situations common to the subway, along with a worn instruction manual for operating the camera, and a coffee-stained instruction manual for building a darkroom.

Egan sorted through the contents of the box.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked with a curious grin.

Armon looked up, collecting his memories. "I found it. Years ago."

"The film, too?"

Armon nodded slowly. "That, took longer."

Later, after Egan persisted to know the origins of the camera, his dad, Armon, finally explained.

Years earlier, while exploring an area off limits to the watchers, he spotted an overstuffed shoulder bag laying underneath the lip of the subway platform. The contents within the bag reeked. Stashed inside were a number of items—a small cardboard box, a zip up bag, a winter jacket, a few cans of tuna, plastic cutlery, a pair of moldy pants, a few dirty shirts, some coupons, a torn, bug-infested sleeping bag, and large sheet of plastic.

"Left abandoned in the subway, used by the people from the above world," Armon explained.

He found the camera in the small cardboard box, sitting in a nest of shredded newspaper to protect it. The zip up bag was stuffed, nearly to overflowing, with professional name brand film rolls, and two instruction manuals, one for the operation of the camera and another for building a darkroom.

“It appeared to have been left there for at least a year,” said Armon. “It didn’t look like anyone was coming to claim it. So, I took what I found useful, the camera and film.”

Initially puzzled by the gift, Egan, who loved the idea of a challenge, began practicing his photography. Egan took his beloved camera and studied it for a full month. With great care, he disassembled it and cleaned it. He pored over the instruction manual reading it all the way through at least twice a week. He wanted to know everything about this camera. As he read and reread the manual the mysteries of how a moment could be frozen in time were finally unraveled.

Then, Egan was off. Photographing everything and everyone, annoying a lot of the watchers, and amusing and befriending others. The camera offered him a way to introduce himself to the world, his world, by offering a barter—a picture.

Egan had found a way to express himself, while giving him something to perfect—his photography skills. For hours, he poured over the instruction manual for

building a darkroom, making mental notes and sketching ideas in his notebook. Then, after measuring the space, he built a tiny dark room in a closet off the bathroom, to develop the pictures.

On weekends, Egan would disappear for entire nights, shooting photographs. Eventually, triggered by curiosity of the world above, he traveled beyond the territories of the clan, and into the forbidden areas of the subway, where humans traveled. Still, he would stay invisible. From his perch on the subway pylon, high above the train, and deep in the darkness of the tunnel, he would sit, aiming his camera in the direction of New York City subway riders as they waited for the train.

Taking the pictures of them, he felt connected, and even sympathetic with them.

“Why?” he asked himself.

The curiosity spurred him to continue taking pictures.

Contact was entirely forbidden and Egan was already breaking the rules, by being in an area where watchers were not allowed to travel.

He wondered why he went to such lengths to capture the images of this foreign world. He wondered why he felt so different from the world of the watchers. And this made him even more curious.

On one of his night’s exploring, Egan found a broken radio, discarded by an inconsiderate traveler. He was so engrossed with it that he didn’t notice, even with his ex-

ceptional hearing, the train fast approaching behind him. By the time he noticed the train charging in his direction, it was too late for him to jump out of the way. He dropped the radio and bolted down the rails. He set off with the long loping strides of his race. With the train close behind him, he ran faster and harder than he had ever run in his life. Egan did not realize the extent of his running abilities until this cold night in December.

He found within himself the power to run even faster and soon, not only had he stopped the train from catching up, he was in fact pulling away. If he'd had time to stop and take notice, he might have heard the passengers on the next station's platform, waiting for the train behind him, talking about the fact that a ghost had just shot through the tunnel!



Accidentally, Egan had discovered “running the rails.” This took him out more and more. After exceeding the speed of a fast moving train, he decided to push himself even further. He played his own game of waiting in a tunnel until a train was almost upon him, and then running ahead of it, down the tunnel.

For Egan, running the rails became a way to ameliorate his anxiety. The endorphins that rocketed through his body as he surged like a shot through the tunnels became very addictive, indeed.

His running had become a catharsis, a way for him to shake off the feelings of insecurity and to prove to himself that he was capable and strong, despite years of being told the opposite.

Although Egan was still shy and felt different from other watchers, his two activities—running and photography—kept him so preoccupied that he became less worried about his social status. He was getting results—powerful, strong legs, and amazing pictures. With his hobbies intact, he established a beachhead for his confidence to take root. In discovering his skills at running and photography, Egan was on his way to discovering his true self.

Running the rails and photography, for Egan, had become an addiction, his own private, recreational drug. But still, Egan felt like an outsider. He was beyond his teenage years and he still felt as if he had not found his

place among his clan. Worse, he felt distant from them. His inability to define his feelings of isolation crippled him, like an itch that he could not scratch, or reach. This vague unease was killing him from the inside out. He had to find out what it was, no matter what the outcome.

During the week, Egan worked in the mines, recovering precious metals from the rock walls. His job consisted of working split shifts. On the first shift, he used a jackhammer-type device to blast rock. On the second shift, he carted the rock to the testing facility. The second shift, which was less strenuous, gave time for his muscles to relax.

The precious metals from the rock were given to elders, a trio of men who had a contact person in the world above. The elders traded the minerals for supplies and provisions needed by the watchers. Rumor had it that the contact was a top government official involved in covert activities, and that even his superiors were unaware of his transactions with the watchers. Although the elders remained tightlipped about details regarding their contact, stories were, nonetheless, manufactured by few watchers and had spread, in whispered conversations, throughout the clan. As usually happens with stories told word of mouth, facts were forgotten and exaggerations filled in the space, turning a minor truth into a major fairytale.

The mining job employed most of the watchers. Ev-

everything about the job was physical. Because of this, most of the them were eighteen to forty years old. Working among the rocks, their bodies became living sculptures themselves, chiseled and muscular. Each day, they hammered rock, took measurements for precious metal content, inserted explosives, cleared the space, and then detonated the explosives. The cleanup followed. They shoveled rocks into metal containers, cleared the area, and then started all over again. From here, the rocks were taken to the testing room, where they were measured and graded for precious mineral content.

Most of the workers who were forty and older worked in the testing room or alternated shifts between the testing room and mining area.

On weekends, when most of the clan was resting, fighting, or partying, Egan would nap until midnight, then prepare his camera gear and backpack for a seven-hour excursion into the areas that were off limits—the subway tunnels used by the trains in the world above. For Egan, photography was a way to connect with a world outside of his own, while remaining in anonymity, unseen by the world above.



ON THIS Saturday night, Egan sat perched on a vertical steel beam that stretched high above the rails,

some twenty-five yards within the subway tunnel. Invisible to his subjects and cloaked by the darkness, he photographed. With his fingers rotating the zoom lens, he focused on the faces of the people waiting for the subway train. Their expressions and movements fascinated him.

Each of these people are their own orbits, with planets that circle themselves, Egan mused. Yet, they themselves are circling a larger planet, with a gravity field that allows little deviation from its path, and less opportunities for escape.

What am I thinking? He thought. *I must be dizzy.*

The combined smells of concrete, standing water, steel, and urine assaulted his assaulted his senses.

Snapshots of their lives developed in the darkroom of my mind, thought Egan. *Where are they going? A big parade of people in a giant race toward nothing.*

Later, Egan would lie in his bed and remember the images, spinning through them like a carousel. He would stop to dwell on his favorite ones, until the deeper meaning surfaced. The photos that pleased him most were the ones that connected him, emotionally, to the world of the humans. He felt less alone, and he slept well.

Like a nature photographer in the wild, patiently waiting for the perfect photo opportunity, Egan kept still. As he aimed the camera in the direction of his subject, his arms and hands seemed to move independently of his body. Once he found someone or something of interest, he held position, found the focus, and pressed the shutter button.

The images played out like a slow motion movie unfolding before him: An older couple, holding hands as they waited for the train, looking as much in love as two teenagers who are in love for the first time. A lonely glove on the platform, its bright red color a contrast to the drab gray color of the concrete. A subway violinist, with eyes closed in concentration, swinging her arm with speed and tender precision, the photo capturing the arm in a blur against the stillness of her body.

Little did Egan know that in the human world, his photos would fetch a high price, such was his skill and eye for composition and detail.

Two young girls stepped onto the platform. He guessed they were his age, twenty-one or very close to it.

As they approached the platform to wait for their train, they talked animatedly, perhaps still slightly drunk from a night out. The first girl, Meghan, looked like a hippie or a traveler or both. She had long hair that looked unwashed. Her outfit was dark jeans, a colorful wool zip up, and equally colorful gloves and hats. The top half of her outfit was a rainbow of colors. It stood out from the dark colored coats—blacks and grays—that dominated the style of New York City pedestrians in early autumn.

The other girl, Alex, appeared to be more sophisticated. She had short hair and was dressed in slim fit jeans, brown leather boots, and black coat with scarf. Her uniform was the classic standard outfit worn by girls all over the city.

As he watched them with his camera, Egan's eyes widened. He was enchanted by these two, but especially the one with short hair. She was pretty in a classical way. Her lips were small, plump, and deep red. Her nose was small but slightly prominent. She had a beautiful bone structure that looked as if it had been created especially to show an example of perfection. However, amidst this sense of formality was a pair of blue eyes that only spoke of humor and the fun things in life.

Apart from in photographs, Egan had never seen blue eyes before. They didn't exist in his race. Up until this point, Egan had used his beloved camera to connect with a world outside of his own, but when he saw this girl, the connection felt even stronger. It felt like someone had turned the knob up a level. Everything became richer, deeper, and more meaningful. The colors and sounds and smells became more distinct. He felt his senses overwhelmed.

He watched her through the camera lens. He trembled. Despite the fact that she was human, and that she had blue eyes, he felt a bond with this girl. It was an affinity, as if she was a long lost friend who had now grown up and looked different, but was essentially the same person.

In this moment, he was transfixed. This short-haired girl, with beautiful bone structure, exuded a grace and a presence that seemed to be lifted from another time,

the 1930s or 1940s. She had presence--a pleasantness, a feminine energy, with gestures so perfect and meaningful. Gestures are the hinges to the door of the heart. An aroma of gardenias emanated from her or perhaps he was imagining this, but there was no difference.

In this moment, all time was arrested, a temporary extraction from the conveyer belt of expectation, and Egan could not move as he reveled in the spectacular—the space in between, life and death, noise and silence—something so foreign to him yet so comfortable. He stared at her, falling in love for the first time.

Her nose was small and curved upward at the bottom like a miniature ski ramp for Olympic hopefuls. Her lips were plump and healthy red and puckered mischievously when she was deep in thought. Her jaw, sharp and angled, resting perfectly atop her long neck. When she leaned in to listen, it was birdlike, wonderful and sexy. As if that was not enough to captivate the attention of anyone who happened to be standing nearby, a small smattering of freckles dotted her cheek in close proximity to her nose, adding a splash of irresistible cuteness to this near perfect female form.

Inhaling to prevent himself from fainting, he looked away, thinking that when he turned to look at her once more she would not be there.

Some dreams are best left to live in the mind, he thought. He exhaled. Leaning his neck back, he rotated his head

around his shoulders, stretching his neck and hearing tiny clicks, like tumblers opening on an old fashioned safe. Then, he glanced in her direction once more.

Her long, slender neck was like a highway that led down into a valley between her perfect breasts, medium sized and beautifully formed, perky, curving up from the bottom and pushing out against her fitted shirt. Looking at her, he felt warm, as the blood coursed through his body. His eyes continued to navigate the landscape of her body. His hands trembled. Slim waist. Beautiful long legs. Graceful hands.

Egan sniffed the air to catch their individual scents. The short-haired girl smelled of the flowers he once found, still discarded and unwanted on the platform floor after the trains had finished for the night. He had not understood what was happening at the time, but a man and woman had been arguing and she had thrown the flowers at the man. He had simply left them at his feet as the woman ran off into the station. Egan had thought they were too beautiful to throw away and had taken them back to his room. With no sunlight they died very soon, but did brighten a dark corner for a while, a multi-colored beacon against the dark rock walls. Egan thought that this girl was even more beautiful than the flowers.

He took a few pictures of both of the girls, but it was Alex that filled his lens.

A gust of wind blew through the tunnel, causing Egan

to shiver. In the distance, a small circular light appeared. The train horn blared, echoing off the tunnel walls as the subway train arrived.

Alex and Meghan got on board. Through the windows, Egan saw a typical subway scene with a variety of city denizens: business people, construction workers, waiters, models, and artists. To Egan, it was a montage of life and color as beautiful as the finest painting at the Louvre. It was a bright contrast from his daily grind as a mine worker, hammering away at rocks, staring at the cavern wall or glancing at the vacant faces of his coworkers, covered in grime, a limited color selection from a pallet of black, gray, and brown.

The train lurched, then began to move, jostling and bumping along the winding, uneven corridors. Egan slipped his camera into his backpack and pushed himself from the ledge. With his arms out, he fell through the air, landing on his feet and placing his hands on the ground to steady himself. Like a giant steel snake attached by rubber joints, the train gathered speed along the rails, then began disappearing into a bend in the distance.

Egan set off after it.

Soon he caught up with it, waited until the tunnel widened briefly, and ran alongside the train. Then, with incredible agility and perfect timing, he leaped into the air, landing on the connecting platform between two of the train's cars. His step never faulted. If he was a gymnast

completing a dismount from a vault or bars routine, he would have scored a perfect ten.

What am I doing? Egan thought. *Contact is forbidden.*

As fast as the thought arrived, Egan released it from his mind. He had to see this girl up close. He had to make contact. He pulled the handle and slid the door open. He entered the train.

Egan made his way through the subway riders. Most sat idly staring into their phones, playing games, or thumbing through text messages. Others sat with their eyes glued to their tablets, reading. A bearded guy read a thick paperback. No one talked.

A few looked at Egan, then quickly turned away. They didn't want to stare. But their glances indicated curiosity. Egan felt their interest. Compared to them, he looked different. Pale and slim with large eyes, he looked as if he'd just arrived from a labor camp underground, which was pretty much true.

He walked his way through the first subway car and into the next. This one was relatively empty. Alex and Meghan sat in the middle section, near the door, with the subway map of Manhattan and Brooklyn directly above their heads.

Egan glanced at them. A rare hint of a smile played across his lips.

The few people in this train had earbuds on and were staring at their cell phones. Egan wondered what the fas-

cination was with this metal device that people continually looked at and continually held in their hands. *Perhaps it's their identification, or a form of currency*, he thought.

No one looked at each other. All were lost in a world of their own.

Egan took a seat a little way from the girls, diagonally opposite them. They seemed to notice Egan as he entered their train car but very quickly returned to their conversation. Egan had no problem hearing what they were saying.

Meghan glanced at Egan.

"He's cute," said Meghan as she inspected her nail polish for chips.

"I have a boyfriend," retorted Alex a little too sharply. Her friend knew her well and had seen the slight raising of Alex's perfectly shaped eyebrows and look in her eyes as Egan sat down.

"What boyfriend?" asked Meghan, sneering.

"He's working," was the reply. But Alex knew it sounded a bit feeble.

"Oh, you mean the one who's always unavailable?" mocked Meghan.

"We hang out," she said. "He's just focused on paying down his student loans." Again, Alex knew her excuse for the guy was weak.

Meghan gave a brief chuckle, clearly enjoying teasing Alex. She grinned, "And that's why his Facebook status is single?"

"He likes his privacy," said Alex. "You don't know him." Then, even Alex laughed at herself, remembering that she sounded like this ten years previously.

"Nice to hear you laughing a bit," said Meghan. "You've been so miserable lately."

"Well I got an audition soon," Alex smiled. "Things are looking up." Then she turned the tables on Meghan.

"Go and introduce yourself to him!"

"He's not looking at me," replied Meghan, deciding that conversation had run its course.

She pulled out her phone and started checking her messages. Now that Meghan wasn't looking, Alex moved her eyes over in Egan's direction. And he looked at her.

To Egan, all of the subway riders suddenly disappeared into blurs and the world fell into silence. The only people that existed were himself and Alex and Meghan. Well, he knew he'd lied to himself and Meghan was actually part of the blur. If he had taken a photograph of the image in his mind, Alex would be the sports star, caught close up in every detail against the blurred background of the stadium crowd.

His eyes locked on hers for an instant and he almost opened his mouth to speak. But, as always, he was overcome by shyness. Quickly, Alex looked away, and Egan assumed that she did not like him. But the reality was this: The connection had been so strong, so intense, that she had to close her eyes and turn away in order to

escape its grip. Feeling unwanted more than ever, Egan dropped his head.

Egan had half expected that, given the chance to see this girl up close, away from his camera lens, her looks might have appeared different. This was not the case. Up close, she appeared even more beautiful. For here, he could sense her presence.

Although she was, by any standard, a typical pretty girl, her most striking feature was her eyes. Oversized compared to the rest of her features, her eyes looked as if they'd been drawn by a caricature artist. They were large and almond shaped. Her pupils, a gemstone green, flared and flickered, a kaleidoscope of hues—light green, light brownish-yellow, an opaque gray—reacting to the sunlight and her emotional state.

Her looks alone captivated him. Her voice, however, hypnotized him and the pace and patterns and pitch at which she spoke left him paralyzed with curiosity and desire. It was beautiful and soft and melodic.

The best way to spell out her words, he thought, thinking of his keyboard, *is musical notes. She has a voice that could hypnotize dragons.* And he had a premonition that, given the chance, that would be the best way to slay them—charming them to sleep.

He was mesmerized. And he wanted to remain that way.

He was tired of the responsible life that gave him

neither freedom nor joy. He was bored by it. He wanted to be taken, to be swept away, by the moment. He felt the childlike desire to be singed by the tongue of fire that leaps from the flame. He felt the adolescent desire to be swept away by the tsunami of attraction, lust, curiosity, wonder. He wanted to be taken. By someone. Into someone else's dreams. He wanted something new.

She found her voice embarrassing, and blamed it on her not getting acting roles. She even concluded it to be the culprit for her thus far failed acting career.

But to him, her voice was beautiful. Each word was seductive, and the pacing—the speed at which she spoke, and the words in between, gave him time to catch his breath. Listening to her talk, he felt peaceful. And this feeling was something so rare as to almost be foreign to him. Like a well-deserved sleep after a ten-hour mining shift when caverns boiled in the midsummer heat and the temperature reached triple digits. The itch that he could not reach, and worse, could not define, surfaced when he listened to her voice and when looked at her.

All of these feelings were triggered within the first minute of him admiring her. They stewed in the kettle of his imagination, bubbling, boiling, and simmering. He hungered for her touch. He longed to kiss her, this perfect stranger. For a moment, he turned away and closed his eyes. Then, unable to fight this feeling, he opened his eyes and looked at her again, already in love.

The train lurched forward, gaining momentum, snapping and popping and clicking and clacking as each subway car pulled the other like the crack of a whip ricocheting in a Technicolor spaghetti western. The car jolted up and down and left and right in quick, abbreviated motions like a broken amusement park ride.

A volley of sounds accompanied the increasing speed—a series of shrill whistles sounding like those issued by a ship captain, indicating their presence in the fog, or a scout master relaying a message to his troops, in which messages vary according to the pitch, duration, and tone. The clickety-clacks, bump-bump-bump-bump echoed like an urgent telegraph from a black and white memory. The cacophony served as a pep rally for the trains thundering passage through the subterranean highway.

As much as he was drawn to this girl, his lack of self-confidence betrayed him. He also knew he should not even be close to all these other humans; let alone one who had made him feel like he had never felt before. He quickly stood up and walked toward the door that connected his car to the one in front.

Sensing that he was being watched, he turned, catching Alex looking at him again. They both looked away, embarrassed. He opened the subway door and let it close behind him. He stood on connecting platform, the wind in the tunnel howling around him and glanced at Alex and Meghan through the dirt-smeared window.

Alex was now openly staring at him and he had to look away, choosing instead to stare intently at the subway rails rushing furiously underneath, blurred and totally indistinct.

Inside the car, Alex continued to watch as Meghan was engrossed in her phone. Alex studied the figure between the trains. Suddenly, Egan jumped, disappearing from view.

"Uh," Alex gasped. She jolted in her seat, bumping the phone in Meghan's hand.

"Hey," said Meghan, steadying her phone.

"Did you see that?" asked Alex, incredulously, unable to believe what had just happened.

"See what?"

"He jumped!" said Alex.

Meghan looked toward the end of the subway car. "No way."

Alex ran from her seat and opened the connecting door. She looked out onto the platform. As she leaned forward in the direction that Egan had gone, the wind whipped her hair as it had done his. She felt a pull on her arm.

"Don't go out there, Alex, that's dangerous!" warned Meghan, adding. "He's probably just running up to the front of the subway cars 'cuz he's in a rush."

Alex closed the door and moved back to her seat, shaking her head still in disbelief.

“He jumped, Meg. I saw it.”

“Yeah right,” said Meghan. “You’re still drunk!”

Outside in the tunnel, Egan ran easily alongside the train, knowing that Alex was just above his head. Ahead of him, the tunnel narrowed. He had one of two choices—jump off the rails to let all the cars pass, or outrun the train.

With his second grin of the night, he took in a deep breath and pushed himself further. Building momentum, he ran faster. His legs thundered in furious strokes. The bottom half of his body was a blur. He moved toward the front of train.

Just as the tunnel narrowed, he darted in front of the lead car. He was running so fast he couldn’t feel his legs. As he approached the curve, the train adjusted its speed to ensure safe passage. This put Egan further in the lead until the train light disappeared from behind him. Egan continued running furiously. His heart pounded in his chest, but he had never felt more alive and didn’t want to ever stop running.

ASSAULT AND ROBBERY

FOR THE third night running, Egan was in the tunnel at the same station, looking for Alex to appear again. He did not understand the human world where someone would go out one night, but not every night. He was crouched again in the subway, just inside the tunnel entrance.

And just as before, as he was compelled to run the rails, outrunning trains and outrunning his own insecurity, he was compelled to take pictures. This time, the photography helped distract him from thinking too much about Alex.

He knew he could never even talk to her let alone have a relationship with her, but he could not get her out of his mind. After looking at the photographs he had taken of passengers exiting the previous train, he lifted his camera once more and an elderly woman came into view. She was petite and frail looking, her hair a pure white.

Egan took a picture of the old woman as she checked the board that showed the arrival times for the trains. With one train only recently departed, there was obviously a wait as the woman went to sit on a nearby bench and pulled a book out of her purse; she started to read.

Egan was again looking at his night's work when a noise and a group of three black teenagers distracted him by descended the staircase. All dressed the same in hooded tops and baggy trousers, the group talked rapidly among themselves. Their accents were strong, but Egan could make out them trying to better each other about girls they had spent time with during the evening.

One of them noticed the old woman and caught the attention of the others. These four people were the only ones on the platform. The teenagers approached the old woman and then, to his great surprise, Egan watched as they began to punch her. He quickly raised his camera and began to capture a record of the horrific event. Once the old woman had been punched to the ground, one of them kicked her twice before another grabbed the purse. As he took his photographs, Egan used his outstanding eyesight to get a good look at their faces. He then sniffed the air to capture and store in his mind their individual smells.

As this awful mugging was going on, the next train was arriving in the station and the heavyset train operator, Bernard, saw the violence unfolding. As he slowed his

train to arrive in the station, he watched the attack with horror, helpless to intervene. He grabbed his radio from the front of his cab.

“We got a robbery in progress at Spring Street Station. Three black teens attacking an older white lady.”

Bernard slid his window open and began yelling at the attackers.

“Hey! Hey! You! Leave her alone! Get off her, you animals!”

As the train slowed to a stop, people inside were also witnessing the crime in progress and they pushed up against the doors, eager to get out and give help to the victim. The three teenagers noticed the arrival of the train and ran off with the woman’s purse, leaving her on the ground in a bloody and bruised heap.

The train doors opened. People poured out. Most rushed to aid of the victim. Others chased the perpetrators.

As he watched everything from his perch, Egan trembled in fear and anger. Fear that these teenagers did not value human life, and anger that they had gotten away with this. He felt guilty that he had not intervened. He knew that, with this strength and speed, he could have overpowered all three teenagers. What had stopped him? Fear? Feeling ashamed, Egan slowly walked off into the darkness, his head bent low.

A short while later, he walked into the cave where

he lived with his father. His mother had died shortly after he was born. His father, a tall man with a narrow face and slightly receding brown hair, was working on a small engine that he'd found left behind by one of the subway workers early last year. It was the same engine he'd been tinkering with for months. Judging from his fidgety motions and his quick, short breaths, he seemed agitated. He looked up as Egan walked in.

"Out taking pictures again?" his father asked.

Egan was silent. He twisted his mouth nervously.

"You need to forget that world."

"I'm just taking pictures," said Egan defensively.

His father leaned back in his chair. "Your world is here with us, Egan. You know the rules. Go out and make some friends, besides that Ramone. You've got to stop hiding behind that camera."

As his father delivered this short lecture, Egan studied his camera. Armon stood up and quickly grabbed it from Egan's hands. Egan had shown him before, when his father had less of an issue with the idea, how to use the camera.

"I saw an attack tonight... on a woman. I... I photographed it," Egan said shyly.

"What happened?" asked Armon.

"Three black kids beat her up and stole her purse."

"Did you help her?"

Egan looked at the ground. "I wanted to but..."

"You didn't help her?" interrupted Armon, stepping toward his son. In one quick motion, he lifted his hand and slapped his son hard across the face. The strike left a bright red mark, like an ink blot on paper, on the younger man's pale skin. Egan looked shocked even though it wasn't the first time his father had hit him.

"Who are you?" asked Armon, disgust in his voice.

"I'm sorry," whimpered Egan as he wiped away tears with his sleeve.

"Sorry? Sorry? Don't be sorry! Be a man!"

"That's not my world!" retorted Egan, now sounding indignant and regretting his words as soon as they had left his mouth.

"Don't you dare talk back to me! You shouldn't have been there in the first place!" Suddenly, like a rapidly deflating balloon, the fight seemed to go out of Armon. He lowered his shoulders. He placed the camera on the table. His composure regained, Armon put his hand to his chin, rubbing at the stubble.

"How did it end?"

"Someone called for help and they ran off." Egan was now really crying, tears racing down his cheeks as if they couldn't leave his eyes fast enough. This time he just let them fall.

"What's wrong with me? Why didn't I help her?"

Armon had a faraway look in his eyes as he searched for the right words.

“Until you love someone, you’ll never know what you’re capable of.”

Egan shook as the words washed over him, penetrating his very core. He thought immediately of Alex and went out again.

An hour later, guilt still tugging at his conscience, he walked one of the tunnels that led toward the mine. He strolled parallel to the tracks that had been laid many years earlier for the purpose of transporting carts of precious minerals extracted from the main cavern.

His entire body felt weakened, wracked with guilt, that he had witnessed such violence without trying to intervene. Seconds later, he stopped. He clutched the mineral cart to steady himself.

Then, he lurched forward, grabbing his chest. His mouth automatically opened wide. Like the doors of a garbage truck dumping its contents, a tsunami of food and drink that had been poisoned by this dose of guilt and regret came forth. His mouth opened uncontrollably, throwing up the food he’d eaten eight hours earlier, a guilty mess of rice, beans, and yellow liquid.

Dehydrated and tired, but feeling restless and physically lighter, he continued walking, lost in thought, until he heard voices coming from a cavern entrance nearby. Careful so as not to attract attention to himself, despite the fact that he was feeling dizzy, he looked inside. Seeing a table with jugs of water, cut lemons floating

inside, he crept over, grabbed one, uncorked the bottle, and downed half of it within seconds. Immediately, he felt better. After taking a deep breath, he surveyed the scene.

Togrul was standing on a large boulder, addressing an audience of about one hundred people. Most were in the seventeen-to-thirty age range, but a few were older. All were dressed in worker's clothes: denim or thick canvas pants, boots, dirty t-shirts, worn jackets. Their faces were grimy from working in the caves, mining precious minerals.

Standing toward the back of the crowd, listening, was Egan's friend Ramone. A petite guy with an innocent looking face, he looked considerably younger than his twenty-two years. He spotted Egan approaching and they greeted each other with a nod of the head. Egan then turned to listen to what Togrul had to say. He had heard rumors of Togrul, that he led a group of renegades who wanted contact with the humans, but this was the first time he had caught anything first hand.

"They say we cannot interact with the world above," said Togrul, his voice sounding like that of a seasoned orator. "Yet, they do. They barter with them, for provisions, while we mine the caves for precious minerals."

Even Egan felt carried away the authority in Togrul's voice. He spoke with conviction. He had the crowd under a spell.

Togrul paused for the crowd to murmur its acknowledgment before he continued.

“They say that we must follow the traditions of our race. The rules of the colony. “We must preserve this way of life ... “

A member of crowd interrupted him. “What way of life?”

Some of the crowd cheered in agreement, echoing the heckler’s sentiment. Togrul waited for the noise to die down before speaking.

“Are we nothing more than slaves?” Togrul rallied. “Should we follow a tradition that only allows us to feed off the crumbs of people who are more powerful?”

The crowd again murmured among themselves.

“Look around,” continued Togrul. “We have been broken by a way of life that does not work, that keeps us in chains. I see before me men and women stronger than that. Come with me and I will remind you of what you are capable of. We can rise above these traditions. We can be great once more!”

The crowd cheered. Ramone cheered with them. Egan did not cheer.

Togrul raised his head proudly, closed his eyes slowly, then opened them, surveying the crowd. He was clearly getting carried away in the moment.

“It’s time for us to leave the old ways behind,” said Togrul. “We will leave at midnight, to enter the world above.”

At this last point, there were muted conversations in the crowd, but this time Egan heard people expressing their concern at breaking the race's traditions of not interacting with the human world above. Some clapped half-heartedly. Ramone was among these as he noticed Egan slipping off into the darkness.

Egan found an empty tunnel and began walking, mulling over the night's events. The assault on the woman played over in his mind. *Why didn't I do anything?* He thought to himself. *I could have destroyed them, taught them a lesson. What am I afraid of?* Then, he thought about Togrul. *Is Togrul really going to enter the world above? What was Ramone doing there?*

An hour later, his thoughts had sorted themselves out. Tired, Egan returned to his room. It was a rectangular shaped cave, fourteen-by-fourteen, with a large, open window above his bed. A fan sat in the window blowing air from the tunnel entrance. The space was tidy and everything had its place. In the corner, stood a handmade wooden desk with a battered, old computer on it. The computer tower had no cover over it, so everything--the motherboard, power supply, CD ROM drive, bus, RAM module, battery, the heat sink, and the processor--was exposed. Sitting beside it was a heavy 1998-era, 17-inch monitor. A duct-taped hydraulic chair was parked underneath the desk. On the other side of the room was an old electric piano. Beside it stood milk crates, laid side-by-

side, with neatly stacked clothes. There was little else. A large, antique-looking fan whirred above Egan's head. It was duct-taped, with old wires and exposed machinery. To a human Sci-fi aficionado, the furnishings would have looked fashionably steampunk.

After looking at his pictures of Alex again, Egan sat at the electric piano and began to play a haunting melody. The song was rudimentary, but quite beautiful; clearly a love song.

THE SECRET DOOR

IN THE world of the watchers, the center of the mining activity was an enormous cavern, hundreds of feet beneath the New York City subway system. From this central hub, which was the prime collection and sorting point, a whole number of smaller tunnels shot out like spokes on an old-fashioned wagon wheel. A network of tunnels connected to each other, in a rugged geometry, similar to an ant colony. Some tunnels acted as the highways with openings to larger caverns along the way that were used for mining or housing colonies.

Each of these smaller tunnels served as the access point to reach each of the specific deposits of precious metals and minerals that formed the supply side of the race's economy. It was in one of these smaller tunnels that Togrul was leading his five most dedicated followers. They walked single file along the narrow passageway. A string of lights hung from the walls. Flickering intermit-

tently, the lights looked like stars in a faraway constellation.

Togrul led the group into a larger cavern. Except for the size of the space, nothing looked different. Togrul turned to them and nodded before looking back to face the tunnel wall. He moved his hand along the damp bare rock, then stopped a few feet down. He gripped a stone that was lodged inside a small crevice in the wall and pulled it away. His hand then reached into the crevice and there was the sound of a latch clicking open. He settled his workman's boots on the floor of the tunnel and began to pull on the latch, grunting with effort as he did so. His followers all gasped as one as the heavy rock began to slowly open to reveal an opening; a cylindrical space with a ladder that led upward.

"How long you been working on this?" one asked, a slightly fat man of about thirty. He was already wondering if he would fit into the space.

Togrul looked at him quickly. "Two years."

"You built this yourself?" asked an older man with little hair.

"No way!" retorted the fat man before Togrul could answer.

"Who helped you then?" asked the older man.

Togrul simply stared at the others and they went quiet, still shocked by what they had seen. They watched as Togrul entered the shaft and stepped onto the ladder. As he disappeared upward, one by one, they too started

to climb. The last, knowing he would be the slowest, was the fat man and, after checking first that there was an opposite latch to open the rock door again, he closed it with some exertion and then began to follow the others. As the door clicked shut, a little way back down the passageway, Ramone emerged from behind a boulder. He had been watching them the entire time.

Soon he was in Egan's room, interrupting Egan playing his piano.

"They left," was all Ramone said. Egan turned off his piano.

"You followed them?"

"Into the main cavern for the mines and then down one the passageways. Couldn't believe my eyes, Togrul opened a door in the wall!"

Egan looked at his friend with an incredulous expression, but said nothing.

"And then they disappeared up some kind of ladder, Togrul and five others, like rats up a drainpipe!" Ramone had read this expression once in a human's magazine and used it as often that he could. It translated well into his own language.

Ten minutes later, Ramone and Egan were at the same spot where Togrul and his followers had disappeared. Egan studied the rock face, but could see no sign of any cracks that would signify the presence of the door. Ramone quickly found the stone on the floor next to the

wall that Togrul had removed to access the latch and then, with the click again, the door was ready to open. As the followers had before, Egan stood and shook his head. Smaller, and nowhere near as strong as Togrul, Ramone struggled with the heavy rock door and Egan had to help.

Egan stared wide-eyed at the sight of the ladder going up toward the subway. Noticing his look of astonishment, Ramone grinned. "I told you!"

Egan peeked inside and looked up before stepping out of the way for Ramone to do the same. When Ramone reached for the ladder, Egan put a hand on his arm.

"No. Let's wait."

"You scared?" mocked Ramone.

Above, Togrul and his followers were still climbing the ladder as the sound of voices reached the fat man who was trailing behind the others. Having a good excuse to halt his long climb for a moment, he reached into a pocket in his canvas jacket and shone down a barely functional flashlight toward the noise.

"I just don't think..." replied Egan before Ramone shot out a hand and put it over Egan's mouth.

Egan looked up and caught the sight of a flashlight, flickering at the end of its battery's life. As the light went out again, Ramone quickly stepped off the ladder and out into the passageway.

"They saw me!" he whispered frantically.

Together, they closed the portal door gently and then

retreated quickly to the boulder that Ramone had hidden behind before. They crouched behind it, waiting and watching.

“We’d better lay low for a while,” suggested Egan in a whisper after a few minutes of silence. Ramone nodded in agreement. Egan motioned for them to leave. They ran off down the passageway.

In the human world, way above the subway, it was early September and in Central Park the air temperature was in the low sixties. The park was more crowded than usual as the New York City residents enjoyed some cooler weather and used the drop in temperature as an excuse to dust off their favorite jackets and lightweight coats that had been stored in the closet all summer. A slight wind rustled the leaves and joined the sound of dogs barking and children laughing.

Central Park hides many natural wonders, most which have been overlooked by the city’s busy residents. One of these was a cave that has remained unexplored for many, many years, its entrance hidden somewhere among the boulders near the Upper West Side.

Deep within this cave, tucked away in a corner of one of the main chambers, was a small, circular opening that was barely discernible, situated between three large boulders. The long-lasting silence of the cave was suddenly disturbed by a loud metallic clang as the circular opening, a round piece of forged steel, fell back open on its heavy hinges.

Darkness permeated the cave. A pair of eyes, glowed

in the ambient light. Slowly, a figure emerged from the opening, and turned his head to scan the surroundings.

Togrul waited for his eyes to adjust, and then surveyed the cave. Like the other watchers, he could see in the dark and for great distances. Still, like humans, it took him a few moments for his eyes to habituate an unfamiliar environment.

Finally, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, Togrul emerged. He climbed out and stood to one side on the chamber floor. One by one, four of his followers crawled out of the tunnel and stood beside him. A few minutes later, the fat one arrived, puffing and panting. He appeared at the top like a long-hibernating mole.

One of the followers stepped forward to help him over the narrow tunnel's threshold. Watching them, Togrul shook his head in mild disgust. Then, with the tunnel lid closed again, the six men stood and looked at each other in the darkness.

Despite the fact that they had cleaned themselves for their adventure, they still looked dirty, like a group of World War II prisoners of war who had been digging an escape tunnel under their prison. When he was sure he had their attention as opposed to them looking around or sniffing the very different air, Togrul addressed them.

"Before we go any further, here are the rules. No communicating with humans. No wandering from the pack. Where I go, you follow."

The fat man, now with his breath almost returning to normal, raised a hand before speaking.

"I think we're being followed," he said nervously. "I heard a noise."

"Did you see anything?" asked Togrul sharply, his voice sounding nervous although he tried to look in control of himself.

"No. But I heard something," the fat man said. "My light gave out."

"I heard something, too," added the man who had preceded the fat man. Togrul took a deep breath.

"Well then, this is as far as we're going tonight. Tomorrow night, we'll meet at the entrance. Arrive separately and pay attention on your journey to make sure you're not being followed. If you see activity near the entrance, let me know."

Back in Egan's cave room, Ramone was pacing up and down, clearly distraught. Egan was pensive.

"What should we do?" asked Ramone for the fifth time. "We've got to tell someone!"

"There's nothing we can do," said Egan.

"They can't just break the rules. They ..."

"It's too late," interrupted Egan.

"No, it's not!" Ramone whined. His voice was getting on Egan's nerves.

"And we can't get involved. They'll..."

"We already are!" Ramone interjected.

“... kill us,” said Egan.

Ramones face crinkled in frustration.

“But we have to tell someone,” said Ramone, his shaky voice revealing his uncertainty.

“We?” snapped Egan. “Don’t involve me. Just forget about it. And don’t go back there. I certainly won’t.”

Ramone wouldn’t let it go.

“But what if they saw me? It’s okay for you. That’s why I should tell someone.”

Egan decided he needed to try a different approach. In a calming voice, he said, “Look. They didn’t see you. Simply lay low for a while, and it’ll be okay.”

Ramone understood what Egan was trying to do, but he walked to the other side of room, facing away from Egan.

“I should just have stayed with them,” he muttered under his breath.

GREGORY'S APPOINTMENT

SOME TWENTY-FOUR hours after Egan and Alex first encountered each other, a weary looking traveler emerged at the 86th and Lexington Street exit from the subway station below. This was a busy place. Pedestrians squashed the sidewalks as they navigated their way through the human traffic jam. Horns blared impatiently from the yellow cabs as those rushing to get home or to an evening rendezvous got in the way of the cars as well.

Beep, beep. Horns blared in quick stutters. Speeding yellow cabs shot through the avenues like schools of sharks. They slowed and stopped to swallow up their two-legged meal tickets before speeding off among the school of four-wheeled fish. At every corner, they stood, the bouquet of paying customers—men in suits, women in business skirts, and well-dressed young people—with their hands in the air.

This was the Upper East Side, an architectural feast, a

collection of modern, cloud-kissing apartment buildings, aging five-floor walk-ups, and gorgeous, multi-million dollar Brownstones. Every few blocks or so, sandwiched in between this real estate smorgasbord, stood massive stone churches. Typically, they were Episcopal, Catholic or Synagogues. The main avenues, that were closer to the Brownstones and five floor walk-ups, were home to the usual suspects of storefronts—bars, cafes, coffee-houses, restaurants, bakeries, high-end grocery stores stocked with international foods, tailors, a few scattered thrift stores, a YMCA, a few cash-a-check stores, and one or two parking garages. In closer proximity to the main subway stations like 86th & Lexington Avenue, the streets widened and the bigger stores elbowed the streets in a show of strength, box stores like Best Buy, P.C. Richards, J. Crew, T-mobile, Barnes & Nobles, and the smaller fish that followed these whales, eateries such as Steak & Shake, Burger King, Pinkberry, 16 Handles, and other culprits for the pot belly.

It was the beginning of autumn and a cool wind birthed in the Canadian Rockies swept through the Upper East Side. The pedestrians pulled up their coats and increased their speed. Everyone had a place to go and a deadline to meet. This is, of course, standard procedure for the Upper East Side—a place so beautiful, so expensive, that few residents have time to enjoy it, because they're working so much to pay for an apartment that they mainly use

for sleep purposes. Ironical that this zip code, that has everyone working such long hours to pay for it, remains unused most hours of the day or evening.

The weary-looking traveler was a well-dressed businessman, in his early fifties, wearing a charcoal gray suit and a light colored trench coat. The belt hung loose by his sides and as he walked briskly, the ends swayed from side to side like two parallel pendulums. His name was Gregory Wells. He had some of the regular trappings that indicated above average wealth and status—a Rolex watch, a leather attaché case, and Italian-made leather shoes. Despite this well-dressed demeanor, his eyes gave away his current mood. They darted from side to side. It was more as if he was a spectator at a tennis game than a nighttime commuter. Clearly agitated, he checked his watch and increased his pace. He was one of those heading for an appointment and he was going to be late.

Gregory Wells walked briskly, heading west, toward the Central Park Reservoir. His phone rang inside his jacket. He swapped his briefcase to his other hand to retrieve the latest iPhone from his pocket. As he pressed the receive button, despite his anxious state, he smiled briefly to himself.

“Alex honey,” he said, his voice brightening. “I’m on my way to a meeting. How are you?”

Alex, the same Alex who had captured Egan’s attention with her beauty, gestures, and voice, while standing in the subway platform a few nights earlier, was

on the other end of the call. She was currently sitting on the stairs inside the School of Visual Arts Theatre on West 23rd Street. Tears trickled slowly down her perfect cheekbones, but she made no attempt to wipe them away.

"I'm o-okay," she half stuttered in a quiet voice.

"Sorry Alex, you're okay?" replied Alex, glancing at his watch as he continued to hurry along. "I can't hear you that well. It's a bad line. I have noises at my end."

"I failed another audition." Alex still didn't speak any louder. It was almost as if she was talking to herself. "I really don't know if I'm cut out to be an actor. But I want it so much, Dad."

"I still can't hear you. Look honey, I have to meet someone right now. I'll call you back real soon."

"Hello? Dad? Are you there?"

Gregory had already put the phone back in his jacket pocket. He was sure his daughter had said she was okay. He really couldn't hear much. Her words had been drowned out by the noise of the city--taxi horns, the sounds of buses and taxis whizzing by, the chatter of conversations, music. He'd catch up with her again once he'd made his appointment. As he crossed another street toward the park, the wind picked up. He pulled up his trench coat collar and quickened his pace even more until he was almost running. The Central Park Reservoir, which runs adjacent to Fifth Avenue, was just across the street.

In the spot where Gregory was headed, a full moon

cast its glow on the waters of the reservoir, like a spotlight searching for a dancer on stage. Even though it was now dark, people walked, jogged, and bicycled along the path that ran around the perimeter.

Rich was sitting on a bench by the water, his arms spread out on the backrest like a boxer taking a breath on the ropes. He was a distinctly overweight man in mid-fifties, dressed in name brand jogger's pants and a sweat-shirt. Damp puddles of sweat sat beneath his neck and under his armpits. His hair was wet with sweat. Judging from his appearance and demeanor, it was clear that either he was new to exercising or his exercise regime wasn't working. As he saw Gregory approaching, he pulled an arm off the bench to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

He dropped his arm to rest his hand on his fat thigh so that Gregory could sit beside him. Because they were of a similar age and height and hair color, they could almost have looked like the before-and-after photos in a TV make-over program. Rich could certainly have done with one, but you'd never want to suggest that to him.

"Gregory Wells," said Rich, not looking at the other man as he settled on the bench beside him. "We had an arrangement."

"No promises were made," replied Gregory, trying to both catch his breath and not appear nervous. He fidgeted with the handle of his attaché case, laid on the bench next to him.

"The union wants the factory," said Rich, lifting a finger to search vigorously inside his nose. Gregory had to look away.

"My broker has..."

"Walk away," interrupted Rich. "Leave it alone." He looked at Gregory while wiping his finger on his pants, leaving a smear across the shiny, black material.

"I know everything about you," continued Rich. "I know that you have a daughter Alex. I know about her mother, even though Alex doesn't. I know where you live."

"You're threatening me?" again Gregory tried to sound stronger than he was feeling.

"Did I make a threat?"

"I can call the police and..." The words trailed off, as Gregory didn't know what else to say.

"Go ahead," interrupted Rich again. "They're my friends." This second comment was made with a supercilious grin.

"I owe my broker this deal." Gregory tried not to sound as if he was pleading. "I have to handle this transaction."

"Greg, Greg. There's a reason no one's bought this piece of real estate yet. Leave... it... alone."

Rich had made his position on the matter entirely clear and Gregory knew it.

Then, much to Gregory's surprise, Rich slapped a meaty paw on Gregory's thigh.

"Ahhhh!" Gregory yelped.

Rich lifted his hand. The light from a nearby street lamp glinted on the blade of a small knife.

He had just stabbed Gregory in the leg. It was only a flesh wound, but it started bleeding, creating a brighter wetness on the dark background of Gregory's suit pants. Then, without looking at Gregory or saying another word, Rich stood up. He stretched lazily, and set off jogging slowly along the path. As he jogged, neither of his feet fully left the ground. It was more like power walking. From the back, his fat buttocks wobbled like two watermelons being shaken inside a black shopping bag.

In shock and in pain from the totally unexpected attack, Gregory got up from the bench and limped toward a hotdog stand. He asked the owner for some napkins and Saran wrap. He told the guy he'd fallen and cut his leg. He hobbled back to the bench, sat down, and dabbed the blood from his pants, then laid tissues over the wound. Lastly, he bound it with Saran wrap. He then laid the roll of cling wrap on the bench by his brief case, put his head in his hands, and just sat there.

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A QUARTER-MILE from Gregory's bench was the unknown Central Park cave, with a barely visible entrance obscured by thick brush. The opening itself was narrow and small, preventing entrance from bigger-sized

people. As it had the night before, the circular metal cover to Togrul's secret, vertical tunnel opened with creaking sound, then a dull thud as it swung against the rock wall.

Togrul emerged first. Then, each of his five loyal followers crawled out. Like the previous night, the fat one was last and almost out of breath.

"You should make that climb every night for the next three months," suggested another watcher, observing the struggle. "Lose some of that insulation."

The other followers laughed. Togrul gave everyone a look and they got quiet.

Again, as before, they gathered around Togrul in the darkness and awaited his instructions. Tonight there would be no holding back on their adventure into the human world. With a practiced step that spoke of venturing out on his own, Togrul picked his way between and over the boulders until he reached the exit of the cave. Then, as a lion setting out for its evening hunt, Togrul sniffed the air and stepped out into Central Park.

With their eyes darting in every direction and looks that seemed to combine excitement with trepidation, his five followers set off behind him.

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GREGORY, STILL visibly shaken, stood up from the bench, and limped across to the hotdog guy to return his

Saran. With a grateful nod of his head, he started walking along the path in the direction of his way home. With the shock of being stabbed and the worry of the outcome of his meeting with Rich, he had forgotten about calling Alex.

With a clear destination in mind, Togrul led his followers through the park. Much to the concern of the fat man, he stepped up the pace into a run. Even with the natural speed of his race, the fat man was struggling to keep up. He was most pleased when, as they get closer to Central Park West, Togrul stopped running and the others followed suit. Togrul had heard the sound of human voices and they were moving toward his group. Their extra keen eyesight told them that heading toward them were three well-dressed preppy guys in their late-twenties, each with a girlfriend on their arm.

After whispered instructions from Togrul to make no contact, the six strangers to this different world walked on and the humans passed them by in the opposite direction. However, once they had gone passed, one of the preppy guys said something.

"Did you see those guys?" he asked the others. "Like they were soooo dirty. Whoever let them into the park?"

"Right," said another.

"And their skin!" a girl chimed in. "So white. Albinos or something."

"Maybe they escaped from the Central Park Zoo," said the first one.

The preppies laughed. Togrul and his followers, who heard everything they said, did not laugh. With their superhuman hearing, these watchers could even hear the tone of their voices. One thing that was never done in the world below the subway was to insult someone unless you had the guts to do it to their face. Togrul and the others turned round and followed the group. Hearing footsteps behind them, the group of preppies, one by one, turned.

The violence was swift and merciless. With their usual incredible speed and their strength from their work in the mines, Togrul and his followers had the preppy guys on the ground. The preppy guys' expensively cared for faces were now swollen. Blood flowed freely from noses and split lips and eyes were already closing. There were no critical injuries, but the beating had been severe. Such was the strength in the fingers of the attackers, the wounds looked like the result of an animal attack. The girls were untouched.

The preppy guys had tried to fight back initially, but they do not land one punch. Instead, they resorted to blocking themselves as best they could. So swift was the movement of their attackers that any effort to fight back had proved fruitless.

As Togrul and the others ran off, Gregory appeared around a bend. In front of him, the three preppy guys were laying on the ground, moaning in pain. Strewn

about like life-sized dolls with battered faces and bruised bodies, they looked like actors in a reenactment for a disaster drill waiting for the help of first responders.

Shocked at such a site, Gregory just stood there for a few seconds. One of the girls screamed, snapping him out of it. He limped hurriedly toward them. The girls stood there in shock, slowly approaching their boyfriends. The one who screamed began crying hysterically.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed 911. He advised them of the attack and its location, but ended the call when asked for his name. The last thing he needed was to be asked by some cop about his leg. He told the three girls that help would soon be on the way and headed off into the night as fast as his wounded leg could take him.

Togrul and his followers ran back toward the cave.

"Did you see that?" yelled the fat one. "They didn't have a chance."

"Next time, they'll keep their mouths shut," said another.

The other watchers continued talking excitedly. Togrul remained silent. His large eyes revealed his emotions: pensive and brooding. He knew it was him that had led the others to break the rules of interacting with humans, but he also knew there was nothing he could do about it.

JILL'S DILEMMA

LESS THAN a mile away from the incident that had occurred in Central Park, a five-story brownstone squished among the many other brownstones stood like sentries along 85th Street. It sat smack dab in the Upper East Side, between 2nd Avenue and 1st Avenue, directly across the street from a large and beautifully built Episcopal church. Most of the other brownstones had been restored to their original splendor. This one--five stories tall, narrow, non-descript, and anonymous--had been left for the elements to leave their signature. The brick was faded. A few determined vines crawled up along one side and wrapped themselves around the fire escape. The wrought iron work that ran along the top exterior was rusting.

Inside the top floor of this run-down brownstone, within a postage stamp sized room, Jill sat cross-legged on the wood floor, sorting through her backpack. Jill was skinny and pretty in a punk rock way. She finished her

search, stood up, and walked to the door. Her hair was short, black, and laid flat with bangs that drooped over one eye. Judging from her appearance, it looked like if she had just woken up. It was the same look that rich kids spent hours perfecting in the mirror. But Jill was no rich kid. She had bright green eyes, a button nose, and a mouth that a guy in college had once described as having been drawn for a cartoon character. Jill had taken it as a compliment, but was never entirely sure. She looked considerably younger than her twenty-three years.

She opened the bedroom door and walked into the kitchen, which also served as the living room. As usual, it was filthy, dark, and cluttered with junk, so much so, that she had to look at the ground as she walked. Otherwise, she would bump into something—a broken vacuum cleaner, a massive twenty-year-old air conditioner, also broken, a chipped vase stuffed with foul smelling rags, or boxes of plates. All of it was junk that her roommate had accepted from a friend who, in reality, didn't want to have to take it to the nearest thrift store because they would not have accepted it. Junk everywhere. It looked like a thrift store had exploded.

She closed the outer door and picked her way across the floor.

With a slight grimace as to what she might find inside, she opened the fridge to grab a bottle of water. There was a yellow Post-it note attached to it that simply read,

‘rent due.’ As she moved to close the door, a big roach ran across the shelf on the inside of the fridge.

“Uggghhhhh.”

As she took a drink from the bottle, she surveyed the kitchen. The small, dark kitchen was crowded with unwashed plates and leftover food. Stacks of unwashed dishes sat on top of each other in a pile, the plates covered in days-old food scraps. Dirty pots and pans sat atop the gas oven, which was missing half of its heat control knobs. A few of the pots still contained leftover food, which served as a gathering point for the roaches and other critters during all times of the day and night. In a vain attempt to keep critters away, kitchen towels had been draped over them. The roaches didn’t give a shit, because the owner didn’t give a shit. The counter top, sticky from forgotten spillages, provided a feast for a gathering of baby roaches. Puddles of spilled juices and cooking oil sat for weeks and were now hardening against the Formica.

Any available space in the kitchen was used to for storage. The entire place was cluttered with junk— a toaster oven, discarded old magazines and newspapers, pizza boxes with congealing scraps of cheese inside, the vase of stinky rags, and other junk. Empty soda cans littered the floor like giant silver shell-casings at shooting gallery. If she had originally intended to recycle them, this had been forgotten. A small mouse scurried into a stove hole that did not work. Jill shuddered.

Her original intention, to heat some soup and toast some bread, quickly left her mind. She was frustrated by the disgusting condition of the kitchen.

“Fuck me,” she muttered to herself as she returned to her bedroom. “Four days at my mom’s and I come back to this.”

To say there was a contrast with the so-called living space was the biggest of understatements. Jill’s room was small, only ten-feet-by-seven-feet, yet clean. It had white walls and a recently polished wooden floor. It was exceptionally bright and clean, with minimal belongings—camera gear, some classic clothing, a backpack, a photo bag, and a messenger bag.

She had moved in four months earlier because the rent, at seven hundred dollars a month, was a good deal for the area, the Upper East Side. Upon walking through the place, she considered the rent reasonable enough to compensate for the dirty kitchen, living room, and bathroom space. What she did not know was that her roommate, an older woman with a perpetual scowl on her face, had spent two days cleaning the common areas and that they looked better than they had ever looked for the potential roommates. Jill figured the cheap rent and the prestige of saying she lived in Manhattan on the Upper West Side more than made up for the fact that the common areas were somewhat dirty. In retrospect, she had no clue what she was getting into.

Immediately after moving in, Jill fixed up her room. Considering the fact that other rooms in the area were renting for twelve to fifteen hundred dollars, she felt fixing up the room was a worthy investment. Also, because the common areas, the bathroom, kitchen and living room were somewhat dirty when she first visited the place, her room would provide a sanctuary. What she didn't know was that the common areas were usually filthy and that the landlord lady had spent two days getting them "somewhat dirty."

The entire room she redid herself—costing her \$478 dollars. And it was a testament, a living resume, to the skills that Jill had collected over the years from various odd jobs—carpentry, hanging drywall, painting, installing shelves, repairing light fixtures, and installing ceiling fans.

Growing up, Jill was ridiculed for being a tomboy, but this paid off when, in her teenage years, she was a favorite for working in jobs that were comprised, for the most part, of male workers. Her pretty face and determined work ethic won her favor with her male counterparts and she was a quick learner. Her current living situation with her filthy roommate triggered bad memories.

She'd worked for a moving company in Burlington, Vermont one winter until, tired of the sexual harassment and the open accusations of her being a lesbian because she refused to accept the sexual offers, she'd punched one of the long-time workers, Ed, in the jaw, leaving him

with a swollen lip and a vow of revenge. This happened after he grabbed her breast for the third time that day. Like most of the other employees, Ed was a small-time criminal and functioning alcoholic. Unlike the rest of the crew, though, Ed was such a longtime employee that he could not be fired. Years before the company was handed over to the current owner, Ed had befriended one of owner's sons, Anthony, in jail and even introduced his sister to him, whom Anthony later married. When the father of the company died, and company was handed over to Anthony and Ed needed a job, Anthony called him. Ed was also the source for Anthony's coke habit, which varied according to seasons and specific holidays. Ed was fresh out of jail, still an alcoholic, and still dealing drugs on the side. And this was the Ed who Jill had given a swollen lip to, who threatened to hurt her if he ever saw her again, a threat she took seriously enough to issue a restraining order on him, and to send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the company in order to get her final paycheck.

In any case, she was glad to leave Burlington, Vermont. From a distance or to a visitor, the town was picturesque, with its cobblestone streets, low crime rate, and high number of college students and writers that inhabited the area. Her experience, though, working among small-time crooks at a well-established moving company, was something entirely different. Most of the

moving company employees with whom she worked were high or drunk half of the time. They smelled like alcohol and day-old sweat, dressed like homeless people, and had chips on their shoulders. Before she moved to Burlington, Vermont, she'd heard good things about it, that it was safe and the people were friendly. Now that she'd lived there and left, she remembered Burlington, Vermont as a place of trolls—short, angry guys with chips on their shoulders who dressed poorly, enjoyed starting fights, and considered being in jail a rite of passage. Up until now, it was a place that had been easy for her to forget. The disgusting kitchen triggered this bad memory.

Her mind returned to her current situation and she looked around at her room. Seeing how clean it looked, she smiled and the thoughts of her job in Vermont quickly evaporated. She had good reason to feel better. Her room looked one hundred times better than the rest of the house.

Jill had built, and installed, custom shelves sitting atop large angle brackets. Beneath the shelves, she had spent forty or fifty dollars on a stainless steel clothing pole that ran the seven-foot width of the room. Taking it home on the subway, she had held it vertically on the floor of the subway and joked that it was a subway pole, because it was about the same size, only it didn't reach the ceiling of the train. The person beside her laughed. On the shelf, that also ran the seven-foot width of the room, set stacks

of neatly folded clothes and carefully arranged shoes. A fresh coat of white paint covered the walls. The wood floors shined from the Murphy's Oil Soap she had used on them the day before.

The room had one window that faced a brick wall five feet away. Since Jill's room was on the top floor of this fifth floor walkup, and the adjacent brick wall was attached to a rooftop that was only ten feet above the window, she'd decided to forego curtains. The diffused sunlight bouncing off the brick wall and filtering into her room made for good lighting. A string of LED lights ran the perimeter of the room, where the wall and the ceiling intersected. The only other lights were a small lamp on the tiny desk, which sat underneath the loft bed, and the ceiling dome light she had installed to replace the broken and filthy ceiling fan that greeted her when she first moved in.

A high shelf ran along the wall above the window. Sitting on it were various black camera bodies, lenses of different sizes, camera bags, a few bottles of camera cleaning fluid, a Ziploc bag containing microfiber cleaning cloth, a Lens Pens lens cleaner, boxes of film, and numerous other bits of photographic equipment. Beneath the shelf was a loft bed with a desk underneath it. As well as being clean, the room was immaculately tidy.

Jill dumped a duffel bag on the floor on the closet side of the room and climbed the ladder to her loft bed. Its

covers were perfectly straightened like an army bunk. She selected a camera body and two lens options from the shelf and put them all into one of her camera bags. She then put that into her backpack. She descended the ladder and grabbed a black leather biker's jacket from her closet.

Before she pulled it on she rummaged in the pockets and pulled out a few ten- dollar bills, a bank card, her New York ID, and Metro Card. Muttering to herself and shaking her head, she pushed the cards and bills into her front pocket of her jeans, and slipped on the jacket. She then hoisted her backpack and left the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

She had spent two weeks fixing up her room. Actually, it was a seven-foot wide by ten-foot length storage space with fourteen-foot ceilings. Her friend Gary, a philosophical computer enthusiast, photographer, and ex-Army intelligence specialist, had advised her to think in terms of cubic feet and Jill did just that, by installing the loft and shelves in order to make the room livable. She thought that the immaculate condition of her newly refurbished living space would encourage her roommate, the landlord, to better clean the common areas. Wrong! They were left worse than before.

Jill thought that her own space, bright and clean and spotless, would provide enough sanctuary to compensate for the rotten food scattered and roach and rat-infested

kitchen and pee-pooled, poop-stained bathroom. Wrong! It had gotten so bad that a mouse, on more than one occasion, had ventured into her room.

Now, because of the time of year, she was stuck living in a shit hole. During the fall, everyone wanted to live in the city, so finding a room or apartment to rent was impossible, unless one paid a broker thousands of dollars. To make matters worse, winter would soon be approaching and it would be impossible to find a room for rent, especially at the current rate she was paying. She had to get out of there. Go outside. Get out. Go for a walk. Anything but sit in her room, which had now become a seven-by-ten prison cell.

Even while in her room, she felt closed in.

For hours, from evening until night, her roommate sat at her desk, just outside her room, adjacent to Jill's door. The roommate parked her large six-foot frame on a dirty chair, and continued pecking away on her dusty keyboard, while staring at the seventeen-inch, fat 2006 era monitor that sat precariously on the cheap particle board desk. Her tapping sounds on the keyboard were annoying. Because she was on the computer all day and evening, Jill had no privacy. Her presence, stacked on top of the fact that the kitchen and the bathroom were filthy, made the place unlivable. All of this was too much to bear.

She had to get out of there.

Thoughts of her dilemma raced through her mind. Frustrated, she closed and locked the door behind her, then tripped lightly down the five flights of stairs and out into the night. As she set off down the sidewalk at a brisk pace, she pulled out her phone and began texting her friend Jaimie.

They still need escorts?

Seconds later her phone vibrated: *Yeah. I thot u didn't wanna do.*

Jill walked to a nearby wall, leaned against it, and continued texting. *I need the \$\$\$\$. Gotta move. Apt is shithole. Roommate is dirty hoarder.*

Wat happened?

Roach in fridge. Roaches all over kitchen.

Ewww!

Poo smear on toilet seat.

LOLOLOL

Let's meet. Tom Bkfst

Will txt u in the am. Gotta run.

k.

Jill pushed herself off from the wall and starting walking. Thoughts raced through her mind. *Did I just do that? Ask her if they still needed escorts? Would I be willing to lay down for a complete stranger? Pretend to enjoy it for ten or twenty minutes, for a few hundred dollars?* Being an escort was a job she had never expected to consider. Her living situation, however, was becoming a health risk.

Over the last few weeks, she had seen more rats invading the kitchen, picking up food scraps dropped by the absentminded roommate. At night, she could hear the rats running above her ceiling on their way to the kitchen to eat. As her loft bed was only three feet from the ceiling, the sounds of the rats scampering kept her up at night. Ugh!

And then there were the roaches. They swarmed the kitchen counters, crawling over the plates with still attached leftover food and creeping in the glass pots that were left out on top of the stove. In a foolish attempt to prevent them from attacking the food, the roommate would leave a thin cloth over the pot. Maybe she thought the roaches relied on their vision and would not see the food inside. Wrong!

Those persistent creatures would crawl up the pot and flatten themselves to enter between the pot and lid, since the roommate hadn't left the lid on properly, and then drop right into the food. For them, it was a buffet, left out every night, still warm. The roommate had poor vision and kept the lights off in the kitchen in order to save money and to keep the kitchen cooler, so she did not see them. Ugh!

More than once, Jill had purchased industrial strength cleaning supplies with the intention to clean the kitchen and bathroom, in order to guilt her roommate into doing the same. Instead of showing appreciation, the roommate

scolded Jill because the supplies were not environmentally safe. She refused to set out rat traps, explaining that there were more human ways to deal with such creatures. Jill nodded politely at her explanation, waiting for her to continue, but she did not say anything further. Ugh!

Where does one reconcile compromise with the ability to exist comfortably? she thought. She usually wasn't so philosophical, but the thoughts continued like an avalanche. All of her friends were doing it, even though she'd lost respect for them the moment they caved, the instant they capitulated to a life of safety and comfort in exchange for a relationship, being in the claws of a financially secure man. Initially, she had resented them, even hated them for it, but maybe it was a form of jealousy? They were pretty girls with good figures, and they needed security, so they started to frequent the bars on Wall Street, especially during happy hour. They men wanted sex and someone who looked good, and they the girls wanted financial favors and gifts.

But had it really come to this? Jill had always called herself independent. But she was tired of the struggle, and her relationship with New York City, as turbulent and beautiful as this city could promise, was beginning to wear on her. She had a nice slim body and a pretty face. And if she could earn money using it to get an apartment of her own, was that a bad thing?

It had been years since Jill smoked and, even then,

she only did it recreationally, whenever she was out with friends drinking. But now, she felt she needed a cigarette. To calm her nerves, for something to do with her fingers, what, she did not know. And she didn't feel like dissecting the reasons for it either.

At the corner, stood a short, pudgy guy wearing a pork belly hat, a sloppy suit and a stained trench coat. He looked like he'd been an original newspaper boy in the 1950s. He was stooped over, lighting a cigarette, his hands up to brace the winds. Jill rushed up to him, brought her jacket up to her sides, like the wings of a bird drying off, to block the wind.

"Hey." Caught off guard, he looked up, astonished to see the cute, young girl assisting his effort to continue his bad habit. "Uh, thanks."

Inhaling it deeply, the cigarette end flared brightly, finally lit.

"Sure," said Jill flatly. "Could I bum a cig?"

He nodded. He pulled out his pack of Lucky Strikes, lifting it in her direction. She took one. He pointed his stainless steel Zippo lighter toward her. Both the cigarette brand and the Zippo lighter completed his look as a 1950s teenage delinquent, only this guy had grown up and was now in his early to mid-sixties. With his squinted eyes and turned up trench coat, he looked like a detective with a drinking problem.

She imagined the two of them, silhouetted in the

lamplight, sharing a cigarette, as a characters captured in a New York City postcard.

What a character, Jill thought. *I wanna photograph this guy*. She looked at him briefly, taking a photograph in her mind.

"Thanks," Jill said, flicking the lighter easily with her practiced fingers, and inhaling.

The man took another inhale. "Yep." He looked at his watch and then turned to walk away. "Have a good night."

"You, too," Jill said. She started walking again, quickly, hating herself for smoking but feeling a little more relaxed.

Jill shuddered against the cooler air temperature and hunched her shoulders in her jacket. She pulled up another name in her contacts and was about to send another text when she received one. She expected it to be Jaimie again, but it was Edgar, the newspaper editor for the Metro, a paper that she freelanced for.

The Metro was a free newspaper, published daily, read mostly by the subway crowd who picked it up at the stands that lined the halls between stations, or from the news guys who said, "Good morning, get your free paper!" to the passersby.

The Metro that had risen to meteoric popularity due to its high amount of photos, making it easy to breeze through during a ten-minute train ride for those who

didn't have time to read, yet enjoyed the high quality images. For Jill, the Metro had given her an opportunity to get her name out in a paper read by millions. Even if the pay was low, people knew her name.

Her mood brightened; this could be work.

Ryan Gosling at Bryant Park with some girl. Now.

Jill quickly replied: *On my way. Thx.*

She stuffed the phone into her jeans pocket and ran toward the subway.

She smiled to herself and her eyes were bright. She had the opportunity to get some photos of a celebrity and that meant much needed money. She'd taken a few days leave to visit her mom in North Carolina, who'd fallen sick with a lung infection. Once Jill arrived at her mom's place, she went through the fridge like a wrecking ball, tossing all the discount cakes and pies that her mom had purchased from a nearby Outlet Bakery. Jill blamed the lung infection on her diet and her lack of water intake. A serious vegetarian for years, Jill restocked her fridge with organic fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and fresh juices. Even though they argued for the first two days, her mom finally capitulated and Jill felt relieved, if not tired, by the time she boarded the train for the return trip to the city.

Ignorance doesn't kill people, Jill thought to herself. Stubbornness does. As long as Jill could convince her mom that the benefits of eating well outweighed the short-term pleasure of eating poorly, then she considered the trip a success.

As she picked up her pace, the people, cars, and buildings turned into a big moving blur. Looking up at the bank of stars that breached a cloud cover, she drew a deep breath, smelled the scent of autumn leaves and felt, in an instant, poetic about the scenario, understanding that despite the fact that she felt lonely at times because she was shy, she understood that New York City was her relationship—the streets, the architecture, the way the sunlight streamed through the trees of Central Park in all its splendor—that the city spoke to her like no lover could.

Then, her mind returned to her earlier thoughts of becoming an escort. She could hear her thoughts as the narrative went through her head.

New York City is like a bad relationship, Jill thought. It forces you to do things you wouldn't normally do. But, you also benefit from experiences that don't happen anywhere else.

Still heading fast toward the subway entrance, she was almost oblivious of a nanny, texting while pushing a baby stroller up onto the sidewalk after crossing the road. Without losing speed, Jill leaped over the stroller and continued running. The nanny, glued to her phone, did not notice.

This place isn't a melting pot, Jill thought. It's a boiling pot. It's a pressure cooker for people's dreams. And, in order to make those dreams happen, you have to do things other people don't do.

Job security in New York City is two or three jobs, Jill thought. We are the pirates and this is our city. We've landed on Manhattan and this is our plunder.

She turned the corner and shot into the mouth of the subway, racing down the steps two at a time, finally skidding to halt in her Doc Martens as she got to the platform to wait for the train. Besides her, the subway platform was empty. For a moment, she stood there, fidgeting impatiently. Then, she ran to the end to peek down the tracks as if that would make the train come quicker. She checked her phone anxiously, bouncing from one foot to the other.

“C’m on, c’m on, c’m on,” she muttered anxiously.

Jill had almost looked straight at him.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

EGAN TUCKED himself in his usual place, hiding just inside the subway tunnel, out of view of anyone that happened to be on the platform. He crouched on the steel pylon, steadying his camera and aiming it toward his target. Jill danced impatiently. He zoomed in on her face and took a close up. Her eyes darted around nervously, betraying the excitement she felt. Her lips were dry. She ran her tongue along her top lip to moisten it. Egan clicked the camera and the shutter opened and closed slowly. He was pleased with the photograph, but looked up and lifted the camera again, ready to take more.

Someone else appearing at the opposite end of the platform had caught his eye. As both his eyes and the

viewfinder locked onto the new arrival, Egan gave out a gasp and his heart almost skipped a beat. It was Alex.

She wore an olive-colored jacket that was adorned with patches from different countries, a calendar for places someone else had been. The jacket had been a gift from Meghan, her artist roommate, who'd purchased it at a Salvation Army the previous winter. Upon opening the gift, and seeing the jacket for the first time, Alex told herself that one day she'd visit each of these countries. But now, she didn't think about that. She just wanted to go to sleep. Forever.

In one hand, she clutched two pages from a script of the play she had just read for, an audition that she failed miserably. Even the director, unwilling to hide her disappointment, put her head in her hands. Seeing the director's reaction, Alex wanted to immediately shrink from the stage and disappear forever, finding her niche in some other category. But acting was all she knew and now this? Besides, she reasoned, she had excelled in theatre in college, and spent thousands on acting classes afterward. Well, her dad had financed the classes, so much so that she felt obligated to succeed, both for herself and for him. However, the acting classes were pay-to-play, meaning the actor pays an acting coach or casting director to offer suggestions, and she was always given encouragement. But now, she doubted the compliments because she was, after all, paying them.

Doubt fell over her and she felt paralyzed and betrayed by her own lack of wisdom. Usually, when she felt sadness, it brought a kind of clarity and this time, the picture was clear to her—she was a failed actress who had purchased compliments to sustain her ambition. She was a fraud. And she had no one to blame but herself. Her lips quivered in sadness. She opened her slim fingers to let the papers fall from her hand. They fluttered like fallen leaves. In the other hand, she held a bottle of Coca-Cola, half-full of the black carbonated liquid, a habit connecting millions of strangers worldwide.

Egan did not know or understand that Alex felt like a failure, or that she felt guilty for using her dad's money to sustain a career she felt she was not cut out for. Egan did not know or understand that Alex was taking medication that intended to prevent depression, but that only exacerbated it. Furthermore, Egan did not know or understand that the combination of emotions and medication was pushing Alex toward a door she never intended to pass through.

His eyes were drawn to her face and she was crying. He desperately wanted to know why she was crying. Egan could not understand why she was so upset and he craved talking to her. Torn between wanting to comfort her and the shyness that prevented him from doing anything, he stood there and continued to take pictures. He justified his inaction with logic; the rules of the clan prohibited contact with humans.

His hand trained the camera toward her beautiful face. His finger pressed the button, and he remained motionless. He was still too shy to approach her and knew it was wrong for him to do so. As he watched her, it was almost as if she was moving in slow motion, her actions were so languid. Her perfect fingers reached into her jacket pocket and came out with a small bottle. Egan lowered the camera and trained his focus on the bottle. On the white label, long strange words were printed, words littered with consonants like a foreign language.

She opened the bottle and tipped something small and white into her hand. She seemed to stare at that for a moment until a tear dropped onto it. Then, she gave the bottle a shake until another ten or so small white pieces were also in her hand. She waited for a few moments again and then, quickly tipped the contents of her hand into her mouth and took a long drink from the bottle. She lowered the bottle to her waist, swinging it carelessly. Suddenly, she opened her hand. The bottle dropped, bounced twice, then rolled toward the subway platform edge, leaving a trail of fizzy drink, spreading its bubbling contents around like sparks from a spiraling firework before it fell onto the subway rails, bouncing twice and finding a corner. Rats scurried toward the gift from above.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

ON THE other end of the platform, the sound of the bottle hitting the ground made Jill jump. She looked in the direction of the sound and saw Alex. At first, she noticed Alex's olive colored jacket and admired the patches from different countries. Then, seeing Alex's sadness, she naturally reached for her camera bag. She quickly twisted and clicked a zoom lens into place on the camera body and began to shoot a series of images of Alex's face. As the girl's face had jumped into focus through the viewfinder, Jill almost gasped at the image of the girl's beauty mixed with the sadness of her tears. The thundering roar of an approaching train grew louder. Now in full photographer mode, Jill continued taking pictures of Alex.

Alex started running toward the edge of the platform.

Jill's eyes widened in horror and her mouth dropped open in surprise. She was too far away to do anything, but did not want to witness what looked like was going to happen.

Her photographer instincts kicked in. She trained the focus and her finger bounced on the shutter button in rapid succession, like a telegraph operator relaying an emergency message.

The pretty girl, with tears streaming down her face, ran toward the subway platform edge and jumped in the air, directly in the path of the oncoming train.

Jill captured the moment perfectly with her camera.

THE EVENT

WHAT JILL didn't capture was the blur that shot past her as Alex moved ever closer to the edge of the platform. She hadn't even lowered the camera or screamed at Alex to stop. Later, she would see that the photographs she had taken at the moment Alex left the platform looked horribly out of focus, such was the speed of movement that blocked the girl from the camera's lens.

With great fascination, curiosity, and burgeoning desire, Egan watched Alex. The second she leaned forward to start heading toward the platform edge, he sensed what her sadness meant. She wanted to end her life. He could never let anyone do that, especially not someone as beautiful as Alex who had taken a grip on him so. In one easy jump, he leaped from his hiding place and onto the platform. Bounding toward her, his athletic legs carrying him faster than he had ever run before, he quickly overtook the train that was about take Alex under its wheels.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

INSIDE THE conductor's car, a tiny space with a small chair and a counter with controls, the train operator was again Bernard. He wondered to himself later why it seemed to always be him that caught the issues.

As the train had come out of the tunnel, he sat with a bored expression at the helm of control panels, looking out the front window. Suddenly, he was galvanized into action to throw the emergency brake as first Alex leaped in front of the train and, an instant later, a blurred figure grabbed her and took her past the still speeding front car.

Instantly, Bernard grabbed the walkie, pressed the red button, and brought it to his mouth. "We got a 12-9. We got a 12-9. Spring Street station."

His hands still shaking, he returned the walkie to its cradle, then jumped to the window and looked behind him at the two figures on the concrete island that divided the tracks.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

EGAN BOLTED across the platform. At the edge, he turned a sharp ninety degrees and leaped into the air. He was a half-second behind Alex, but much faster.

As the train lurched and sparks began to fly off the wheels, his strong arms enveloped Alex. He carried her

through the air until they landed in a heap on the concrete island between the northbound and southbound tracks.

Even though Egan's hand was cradling Alex's head, she landed with such force that her head bumped the steel pillar, rendering Alex unconscious. Egan looked at her and, despite his wildly beating heart, the gash on his arm, the dirt that covered them both, and the squalid environment, he felt at peace.

Noises erupted around him, people yelling, people talking, lights from smartphone cameras. He felt himself being watched.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

EVEN AFTER Alex and Egan had landed and were subsequently blocked from view by the braking train, Jill's eye was still glued to her camera. Time stopped. What she had witnessed seemed like a dream. A girl attempting suicide, caught in midair by a guy who came out of nowhere. And they both disappeared as the train screeched passed, with its brakes screaming against the wheels. What she couldn't tell was whether the train had missed them or they were both under the wheels.

As a freelance paparazzi photographer, accustomed to risk in order to get the perfect shot of up-and-coming celebrities, usually in compromising situations, Jill knew what it was to be nervous, and she understood the

gift of fear, but this was something entirely different: a mixture of surprise and concern. She felt a lump in her throat that reminded her of the time she'd swallowed a heaping spoonful of molasses on a dare. She did win the ten dollars, but almost choked in the process.

She was immersed in the moment. Captivated. Stunned. Frozen in a sense of wonder that was neither uncomfortable nor familiar, but something entirely foreign to her. It had been years since she had felt this way, and she stood outside of herself, accessing her environment, wondering what to do next. Moments later, she returned to her body, her eye twitching to form a perfectly rolled tear. It was not a tear of sadness or joy. Rather, it was a tear of wonder.



ALEX AWOKE in a complete daze. Her head was throbbing. She lifted her hand to her head and touched the swollen area, wincing in pain. She felt sick and woozy from the pills she'd taken.

How am I here? She thought to herself.

She had expected to never see or hear or feel anything ever again. Yet there she was, cradled in the arms of the guy she'd liked the night she'd been out with Meghan. It felt so right and she was so very grateful. As she had left the platform and was falling into midair she had

suddenly thought that it was all a mistake and she didn't really want to die. She was just feeling so screwed up. She started crying softly. This time, it was tears of relief.

Physically, she was only slightly injured. The back of her head, upon landing, had sustained injury when it hit the pylon. A swollen area, the size of a silver dollar, was the result. Dust covered her face and her jacket had been ripped on a large metal bolt when they landed. But, otherwise, she was unhurt. From the tear in her jacket, one of the patches had been torn away and was completely missing.

Egan looked into her eyes and brushed some dirt from her cheek; it left a mark where her skin was still wet from her tears. He thought he'd never seen anything more beautiful. Alex was now getting even sleepier and did not really notice when Egan rested her gently against the pylon for a signal gantry, like a beloved doll put down after play. Through her fast closing eyes she caught an image of the guy running off down the tunnel and then she heard the noise of people shouting to her from the opposite platform. Suddenly she felt violently sick and rolled to one side, depositing an earlier lunch she'd eaten and all the pills she'd taken onto the rail below. She turned back and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She didn't really care what she looked like, she was just happy to be alive.

Now, shock was setting in and her body wanted to

shut down. Just before she lost consciousness she noticed Egan's camera on the concrete by her hand. She slipped it into her purse as she drifted into a peaceful sleep.

By now the subway was bustling with activity on both platforms. After the train had been emptied and the check had been made to ensure no bodies were under it, it had been reversed back out of the way. This was so that people on either side could get to Alex. Paramedics were making their way toward her. Cops and transit authority staff were milling about, asking questions, making notes, setting up police tape. They, and other first responders, sought to retain a semblance of order and normality for the other passengers who had arrived for a train, unaware of the drama that was unfolding. Along the platform edge, the cops had formed a wall, to prevent people from stepping too close to see what had happened.

Jill had stopped taking pictures after Alex and the running guy had disappeared, but she was busy again now capturing the rescue and recovery being put into motion. She managed to poke her lens through the crowds to get a couple of pictures of the now-unconscious Alex before she finally lowered her camera. The shock of what she had witnessed started to sink in. Just standing and staring at nothing in particular, she eventually realized her cell phone had buzzed.

She checked the the incoming text.

He's leaving wer r u?

It was a text from Edgar, reminding her of her original mission.

Shit.

She was just stuffing her phone back into her jeans when a cop approached her.

“Excuse me. Were you taking pictures of... ?”

Jill didn’t wait to answer. She took off and tried to disappear into the crowd. But the cop was on her heels as she ran up the stairs. However, she was younger and more fit than him. She ran, vaulted over the turnstiles, and raced up the stairs and out into the night. The cop stopped, bent over and put his hands on knees, his breathing ragged. Eventually, he stood up and turned to go back down the stairs.

“People,” he muttered in resignation, a short shake of his head.

Out on the sidewalk, Jill, still running, turned around in all directions to see that the cop was not there. She continued walking quickly, her head spinning around to soak up up her environment. Hundreds of people swarmed within her thirty-foot radius, swimming pools of pedestrians, in-and-out of her perimeter.

Human nature has no warning signs, she thought. *The fragility of life.*

She felt unreal. What she had just witnessed had kick started a fifth sense within her.

From the crevices and cracks of the city, people

poured out. From doors to stores, apartment buildings, retail stores, taxis, cars, they came. From the mouths of the subway, they poured forth, to march the sidewalks and rush across streets, moving to the beat of the music in in their earbuds. Years earlier, they had been born in flesh but this time around, they were birthed from the doors of the city.

The people moved in their own orbit. They shuffled and trudged along in a big, perambulating mess, reflecting and adjusting their posture to the city around them. Like ants, they marched amidst the rebel garden, shadowed and watched by the apartment towers that clustered and crowded out the night sky all around them. They advanced toward their oxygen fix—Central Park—the patch of grass and trees and respite that runs from 59th Street to 110th Street.

Seeing a bench, Jill stopped, sat down, retrieved her camera from her backpack, and thumbed through the digital images. Finding the image of the blurry rescue that seemed to be within inches of the oncoming train, she smiled broadly. At the same moment, she felt lighter, as any worrisome burdens that had been strapped to her back were released, leaving her feeling younger and physically lighter.

“Yes!” She exhaled at the sky. She looked at the picture again, her shoulders began to quiver as she laughed uncontrollably, a moment of pure joy, unplanned and perfect.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text.

He's gone.

Jill quickly replied: *Sorry. Train delay.*

She stood up and began walking, claiming a space among the swarm of New Yorkers.

If this were any other night, she would have been disappointed, having lost the two hundred and fifty dollar bonus that typically accompanied a celebrity picture. But this night was different. What she had witnessed, what she had just taken pictures of, was far more special than a celebrity-of-the-month. She had a feeling.

Getting her breath back, Jill put her head down in disappointment and didn't bother to reply. In order to get out of the way from the throng of people, she walked hugging the side of the buildings. She smiled. She looked at her phone and began texting.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

EDGAR, THE editor for the newspaper that Jill freelanced for, waited for Jill to text her with confirmation that she had gotten pictures of the celebrity. But an hour later, he still had not heard from her. Disappointed, he went to bed.

His tiny apartment that was virtually empty. No pictures. No takeout boxes. No knick-knacks of any kind. An industrial-looking coffeemaker sat on the kitchen

counter beside a neat row of books. Besides that, the apartment looked as if was unused. It was highly indicative of a long time bachelor pad from someone who didn't own much in the way of possessions. On the coffee table there was a stack of unopened junk mail piled beside a stack of opened mail.

The bed was a comfortable nest of mismatched sheets and pillows. A comforter and some additional cushions provided further color clashes. Edgar had burrowed himself into a cozy position a half-hour earlier and was just falling asleep.

Edgar was overweight and balding with a truly terrible comb-over. He had a face that said too much coffee, too much stress, and too little sleep. He was just closing his eyes. On the nightstand beside the bed, his cell phone began to vibrate into life.

He grunted under his breath. A hand with thick fingers emerged from beneath the pile of sheets and grabbed the phone. His head came out from between the pillows as he squinted without his spectacles to read the incoming text. He could make out it was from Jill.

"Better have a good excuse," he muttered.

Sorry. Know it's late. Got some pics worth seeing. Let's meet at usual. Sorry!

Edgar shook his head and slowly pulled off the covers.



EGAN RAN the rails, leaping into the air for distances that would double a long-jump world record and then ran again. He felt so alive! He had fire in his eyes and a glow inside that came from the feeling of huge accomplishment. He had not only helped someone, he actually saved a life! And not just any life, but that of the person who, for days, he had been unable to get out of his head.

Then he suddenly stopped, sensing something was wrong. He put his hand to the pocket in his pants where he normally kept his camera and it wasn't there. He then realized that he hadn't opened his hand and there was something in there. He slowly opened his fingers and there was the flag of Denmark, torn from Alex's jacket. He had no memory of even picking it up.

He pushed it into his pocket, turned round and started running back toward the scene of the incident. As he got close enough to be able to see clearly, he leaped on the top of a vertical steel beam. From his perch, he surveyed the scene unfolding just twenty-five yards away.

First responders—cops, transit workers, paramedics—swarmed the area. Yellow police tape had been set up to block off the crowd that stood on the other side with their phones out. The train had been emptied out and a cop was talking to the conductor. News teams were arriving and setting up cameras and reporters were interviewing bystanders.

Egan zoomed in on Alex. A crowd of people were

around her. Paramedics approached her with a stretcher. Her jacket was torn, her arms were scraped, and her face was streaked with dust. But despite the noise and chaos around her, she was sleeping.

Egan smiled.

Egan dragged his eyes away from Alex and used his superhuman vision to look for the camera. He could not see it anywhere.

AFTERMATH

FORTY MINUTES later, Edgar shuffled into the run down diner. Despite the squalor, the diner sat halfway between where he and Jill lived, so it became the spot where they usually met. It was a narrow place with a counter and a galley kitchen on one side. A long bar, that served as a table, ran along the other side, just below the window facing the street. Underneath the bar sat rows of stools. In the back, a cramped area held a tiny collection of tables, near the door that led to the bathroom. The place was cheap and the food was just north of okay. Usually, all the stools were taken and there was standing room only, especially on the weekends.

Worn posters of movies no one would have heard of covered most of the wall on the tables' side. It was clear the owner must have got them when someone else threw them out. Many of the edges curled up where the tape had come unstuck, leaving mottled marks in the paint.

The place was occupied with the late night crowd—shift workers, bakers, cops, utility workers, and a small group of club kids.

A tired looking Indian man roamed up and down the tables clearing plates and refilling coffee. Edgar had to dodge quickly past him after they did one of those embarrassing ‘both move in the same direction at the same time’ routines.

He spotted Jill at a table in the back, her leather jacket thrown over the back of the chair next to her. In front of her was plate piled high with bacon, eggs, sausage, hash browns, and a stack of toast on the side. Half of it was already gone. Jill was attacking the remaining half as if she was participating a competitive eating contest.

“I thought you were a vegetarian,” said Edgar with a raised eyebrow.

“Not today,” said Jill.

“A little hungry?” quipped Edgar as he sat down opposite her. Jill glanced up, then down, continuing to eat. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“Two days ago,” muttered Jill, with her mouth still full. Before she finished the sentence she shoveled in another fork-full.

“Been on the Greyhound bus back from my mom.” She took a drink of coffee. “And the ticket took all the money I had with me. Forgot my ATM card.”

The Indian guy wandered over to top up Jill’s coffee

and Edgar just ordered one of the same. She dived into the food. Then, she came up for air and looked directly at Edgar.

"You look sick."

Edgar looked across at himself in the mirror on the wall behind the counter. His comb-over was sticking up in all directions like some ragged Red Indian headdress and his skin looked pasty. His unshaven face and his patchy stubble looked like dirt. He unselfconsciously straightened his hair with the fingers of one hand.

"Don't know why you bother with that," sputtered Jill, making it sound more like bar-wi-at. "Just shave it."

"It's fine," he said. "I just ran out of hair cream." The Indian guy placed his coffee on the table. Edgar took a drink.

Jill was about to ask why he didn't use gel, but then decided he'd probably never heard of it.

"Another couple got attacked in Central Park," he said quietly. Jill nodded that she'd heard him and then swallowed.

"What happened? Are they alive?" She buttered another slice of toast. "Want one?"

Edgar shook his head then changed his mind. "Yeah sure."

Jill passed him the toast and started on another one for herself. It was Edgar's turn to talk.

"Barely. The one guy who got it the worst, he's on a

respirator." Another bite. "Claw marks on him and the other two guys." Edgar stopped talking to add more sugar and cream to his coffee. He stirred it and took a long, slow gulp.

"What's unusual is that the girls who were with the guys were untouched."

"Hmph," Jill grunted.

"Third precinct wants us to kill it."

Jill looked at Edgar. "Don't."

Edgar shook his head in disagreement, but it was halfhearted as if he was not really sure.

"Between you and me, I hear the Police Commissioner's being bribed by the landlords near the Park."

"Whatever happened to the truth?" questioned Jill with a shake of her head.

"I can't afford to lose any more advertising. Especially from real estate agents," explained Edgar. "I'm gonna bury it on page eighteen."

"I wish I could go back to when newspapers reported the truth." Jill finally put her fork down. "When people were good."

"Nah, people were never good," Edgar said. "They just covered it up in the past. Now they don't care."

Jill delved into her backpack on the chair next to her and handed her camera to Edgar. He turned it on. It whistled to a low hum as the LED panel came to life. "This better be good."

Jill was silent and sipped more coffee as she waited for him to review the pictures. Edgar's eyes flickered around as he moved through the digital images. His focus intensified as he thumbed through them. Once in a while, he nodded briefly which Jill knew was the closest she'd get to a compliment. Without a word, he finally handed the camera back to her. She turned it off before replacing it in her backpack.

Edgar finished the last of his toast. He was much slower eater since he had to watch his ulcer. He nodded to the Indian guy and got refills for their coffees. He noted that Jill was now on her third and must have been feeling really wired. She was made for newspaper work, but he'd never tell her.

"You get her info?" he asked.

"Nah. It got crowded and then I had a cop on my tail. He wanted my pictures so I ran."

Edgar nodded his approval and got out his phone, a battered old Nokia, and sent a text message. He took a swig of coffee and brought his elbows up to the table, putting his hands together and rubbing them. He looked out the window. Jill looked at him for any signs of approval. He glanced straight at her and gave a half smile and nodded. Jill nodded in return. He put the phone down on the table in a wet ring from where the waiter had spilled it. Jill leaned forward and put her elbows on the table, her eyes were bright.

“This is front page stuff right? I can get an advance?” she asked, sounding like a child asking to go to the zoo.

Edgar simply sighed and then his phone buzzed with a message, vibrating across the table as if it was trying to move itself away from the spill. Edgar looked at the message and then pressed a couple of buttons. Jill’s phone buzzed immediately afterwards.

Jill picked up her phone and looked at it.

You’ve got her details now. Follow her and find out the whole story.

Jill nodded, wondering how Edgar had got the girl’s name and address already, but knew it would be a waste of time asking him.



AT THE same time, but miles away and hundreds of feet below the street, the incident with Alex was also a subject of conversation between Egan and Ramone.

Egan was playing a particularly melancholy piece on his piano when Ramone entered his room. His euphoria over saving Alex had been rapidly squashed by the realization of the loss of his camera. He truly needed it back and knew that the only way to get it was by using the vertical tunnel that Togrul and his followers had taken to the world outside.

“But you can’t,” urged Ramone. He sat on the floor,

leaning his back against Egan's bed, his arms wrapped around his legs. Egan had just finished recounting the events of the evening.

"Look, that's awesome that you rescued her," started Ramone. "But now you've got to forget about her."

"That's not gonna happen," said Egan. "Besides, I have to get my camera back."

Egan played a few notes. It was clear his mind was not on playing music.

"You can't go back to that world," said Ramone again. "You were the one who told me that."

"I know," replied Egan, but he still seemed resigned to what he needed to do if he was to get his precious camera back. He could not imagine life without it.

"Maybe I can talk to Togrul about finding the camera," said Ramone.

Egan shot him a look. "What? You and him are friends now?"

"No, it's just that he's gonna go ... "

"If you're a friend of his ... " Egan interrupted.

" ... to that world." Ramone finished.

" ... then you're no friend of mine," Egan continued, his voice shaking. "He's hated me ever since that initiation."

"He's been to the world above. He's willing to do it if you could barter ... "

"Stop," interrupted Egan. "I'm not gonna try to pull a

favor from the guy who's been knocking me down every time I cross his path."

Ramone paced the room. "I could talk to him if you want."

"What?" said Egan. "Now you're *his* best friend?"

"No, it's just ... you can't go back. You know the rules."

"I know," said Egan. "But, I have to get the camera."

"Buy another one," suggested Ramone. Then, he realized that was not possible. Egan could only do that by going to the outside world and using some of the human's money, which none of the watcher's knew how to get.

"With what? I don't have human's money," Egan said. "I don't need to buy a camera. I already have one, that I know how to use."

"Have you ever even been to the world above?" Ramone asked.

"It's not like I'm accepted here."

Egan's reply was not what Ramone expected. Ramone shook his head in frustration.

"You know what? Don't start..."

"It's true," interrupted Egan.

"... looking for pity again."

"I don't want pity, I just need to get that camera," said Egan. Then he added under his breath, "and I need to find out why I'm so different."

Ramone simply shook his head.

"Forget about it."

"I can't and I don't want to," said Egan a lot more forcefully, adding, "If Togrul can do it, so can I."

"He's got followers but you..." Ramone didn't need to complete the sentence. Egan knew full well that Ramone was the only person who talked to him and even he was not on Egan's side tonight. Egan was quiet for a few moments as he pondered something else about the situation.

"I have to get that camera," repeated Egan "And that girl, I feel..."

"What?" interrupted Ramone sharply.

"... connected to her in some way. I have to know why."

"That camera, it has pictures of us on it?" asked Ramone weakly.

Egan simply shot him a look.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

FOR THE last few years, Egan had always wanted to surrender himself to something greater—the bigger mission that all men must find, the rite of passage that would turn him into a man. He had a feeling that the search for his camera would provide him that mission. He trembled, feeling scared and excited at the same time. He had hoped his excitement would override his fear.

Some ten minutes later, Egan and Ramone entered

the narrow passageway. This particular tunnel ran along areas that were mainly unexplored. Strings of flickering lights hung from posts every twenty feet.

Determined to retrieve his camera, Egan led the way. Ramone kept glancing over his shoulder to make sure that they were not being followed. After a particularly steep incline, Egan stopped and looked at Ramone.

Egan nodded his head. He was sure he had found the doorway. He ran his hand along the rocky tunnel walls, stopping a few feet from the floor and the noise of the latch broke the silence. He heaved the door open, then held it, and moved it slowly to the rock wall. At this time of night, the sound would echo throughout the tunnels and draw the attention of the bored and the curious.

Egan and Togrul peered into the opening that led to a cylindrical space with the ladder that led upward. Egan leaned his body into it, grabbed a rung, and brought his legs inside of it. He turned back to look toward Ramone in the doorway. Ramone did not move.

"You go," said Ramone, his head down. "I'm sorry."

Egan looked at his friend and shook his head. Then, without a word, he turned away and began his climb.

Feeling embarrassed, but relieved that Egan had not pressured him into going, Ramone secured the door. He stood there for a few seconds, then walked the tunnel toward the big chamber. He looked lost and sad. He wished he had the courage to go with Egan.

By the time Ramone was back at his home with his parents, Egan was pushing back the metal cover in the cave in Central Park. The clang as it hit the floor made him jump. He felt relieved as he looked around and realized he was alone in a cave. During his climb, he talked himself into expecting to appear in the world above in full view of a crowd of humans. Years earlier, he read a story, in a discarded newspaper, about a boy who had fallen into something called a well, and that there were many people waiting for him when the boy was rescued. He crouched down and quietly closed the hatch and then let his eyes work out the way to go. After a couple trips into dead-end tunnels, he saw the brighter light of the outside world and found his way to the mouth of the cave. His fingers reached the edge and he peered out into the darkness of Central Park, lit only by the moonlight, city lamps, and the stray light from nearby buildings.

The air was cool with gentle breezes signaling the arrival of Fall. Egan surveyed this new environment with wonder. Around him, clusters of people, some in groups, some alone. Most of them wore earbuds and stared into their smartphones, using their thumbs to type something. Only a few people were talking to each other. They were either walking along pathways or sitting on the grass or under trees.

Cautiously, Egan left the cave and entered, what he had learned from a discarded tourist map, Central Park.

Wide-eyed and smelling the air, a sense of wonder lit his eyes as he began to take it all in. Egan's expressions were those of a child, finally taken to a place he had been longing to go to, only to find it even better than he had imagined. As he stood looking around, a group of pretty girls approached him along the path. He tried to ignore them, but saw that they were glancing at him and smiling. He clearly heard the whispered conversations that they too, like Meghan and Alex had done, thought him good-looking. Egan smiled shyly to himself and wondered briefly why it was that his own people did not like him but the humans seemed to take the opposite view. But he soon dismissed that thought.

Egan found a nearby tree, and sat down with his back up against it. He then closed his eyes and stilled himself as he brought back images to his mind of those first moments when he saw Meghan and Alex on the platform.

Mentally, he ran his fingers through a series of files in his mind. He stopped at the appropriate one and took out Alex's scent that he had stored away. The image of the flowers it created brought another smile. Then, slowly moving his head from side to side as if he were a metal detector, he scanned the air with his super sensitive nostrils. Thousands of different smells invaded his senses. But, in micro seconds, he dismissed each one. The specific smell filled the air. He sniffed deeply once

more. He smiled, stood up, and began walking. He knew from the map that was committed to his memory, he was walking in the direction of the Upper West Side.

As he walked towards Central Park West, he stared in amazement at the huge buildings that towered before him. Watching the people, the buildings, the bicyclists, the trees that dotted the park, everything. He then took another deep breath, smiled once more and walked briskly toward 86th Street. With a few more reviews of his direction, he found the building. He stepped stealthily toward the building next door and jumped over a high fence in a single leap. After a final, nervous look, he quickly scaled the corner of the building.

The sheer speed of his ascent was astonishing. As a watcher, he was endowed with the special ability to scale buildings with the minimum of finger and toe holds. He reached the top in less than a minute. Once on the roof, he crossed to one side, and checked his bearings. He sniffed the air to find the particular scent coming from an open window from the apartment building across the street. Satisfied with his location, he then settled down to wait.

The apartment he had selected, judging by his stored smells, belonged to Meghan and Alex. But, only Meghan was in the apartment. The scent he truly sought was rapidly approaching along the street.

FRUSTRATION

BERNARD, THE transit authority driver who always seemed to catch the problems on the train, sat in the musty break room for New York City subway workers. His large frame was pressed into a corner table and the chair looked like it belonged to a child. He held a cup of coffee and stared listlessly at the bulletin board on the wall ahead of him.

The room was an afterthought, typical of the break room for those who work in the service sector jobs. The entire place was in a state of disrepair. Along one wall were lockers, the doors dented and scratched. Some had broken locks. Others were peppered with stickers and graffiti. In the corner stood an industrial sink, an old fridge, and some cupboards with various jars and bottles inside and the expected mismatch of stained and broken cups.

Bernard leaned forward on the table, resting his

elbows on it as he nursed a chipped Yankees cup in his big hands. Sitting with Bernard was his buddy, Jerry. Opposite to Bernard in size and shape, Jerry seemed to be talking, but Bernard was not taking anything in. He simply seemed to be looking straight through his friend.

"I was saying it's not your fault. It's nothin' to do with you," said Jerry, clearly repeating something he had already said.

Bernard now seemed to catch that Jerry was talking to him, but when he replied it was more as if he was talking to himself.

"I wasn't paying attention." He put his cup down and began pushing it from side to side with his fingers. "I should've stopped earlier"

"Don't blame yourself," consoled Jerry after draining his own cup.

Bernard looked into the distance. "Something saved her. If I'd been paying attention."

"Something?" asked Jerry, lowering his eyebrows into a questioning frown. It sounded more like 'sumtink' in his broad New York accent.

Bernard didn't answer and instead he squeezed out from the table to get himself some more coffee from the pot near the sink. He then poured some for Jerry as well.

"I'm listenin'," said Jerry after Bernard sat down again.

"This girl jumps in front of the train. Tries to commit suicide..." He paused.

Jerry did not interrupt. He could see that Bernard was replaying the scene, frame by frame, in his head.

"This guy, this thing..."

"Thing?" questioned Jerry, unsure where the story was going.

"... appears from nowhere, catching her. It was so fast. It didn't seem human."

"Thing?" asked Jerry, although it more a statement of disbelief. "It."

"It looked like a guy."

Uncomfortable silence filled the space. Jerry debated the story in his mind. Bernard had a distant look in his eyes.

"Maybe it was an angel!" teased Jerry, trying to lighten the mood. The comment seemed to go right over Bernard's head.

"Never seen anything so fast..." said Bernard, shaking his head.

"Or maybe it was one of those people you see out-running the train..." said Jerry mockingly.

Bernard looked at Jerry flatly, silencing his teasing. Jerry now looked at Bernard intently, showing more sympathy. "You're gonna be fine."

"I know what I saw," insisted Bernard. "No human can move that fast."

Jerry nodded. Bernard looked at him, feeling as if Jerry finally understood. A few moments of silence followed.

Jerry leaned in toward Bernard. "What size straight jacket do you wear?"

Bernard stood up. His fists were clenched but his hands were shaking. Jerry held up both his hands in a placatory manner.

"I'm kidding," said Jerry, his hands up indicating retreat. "Look. You thought you saw something. On a late-night shift it happens."

"I should've stopped the train," Bernard repeated for the third time. "I saw her near the ledge. But too late."

"There's nothing you can do. Just like when that lady got mugged."

And with that, Jerry got up himself and left the break room, shaking his head. He'd clearly given up on getting his friend to be more philosophical about what had happened. Bernard still stood there, staring into space.

A short while later, in a seedy section of the working class area of Brooklyn, Bernard hurried down the street. Now dressed in a blue jacket and brown pants instead of his Metropolitan Transit Authority uniform, he carried a large black travel bag on his shoulder. Without seeming to notice his surroundings, and moving quite quickly for his bulk, Bernard hurried past a string of locally owned convenience stores, laundromats, takeout food places, and a hardware store. Most had metal mesh security grills over their doors and windows, already closed for the night. One place that was still open was a pawnshop.

Behind its mesh-protected windows sat a small mountain of objects—electronics, musical instruments, speakers, jewelry--that looked like imprisoned and discarded toys gathering dust, their owners seeming to have outgrown them. Bernard pushed open the door and entered the shop that was as full and messy as the windows; nothing seemed to have a specific place.

Behind the counter, the pawnshop owner stood, his bulk almost matching Bernard's, but a good twenty years older. A cigarette clung to his bottom lip and smoke curled into his eyes which held a look of permanent suspicion. Wasn't smoking indoors in a retail establishment illegal this day and age? Not in this part of Brooklyn, where cops had real complaints to consider. Besides, anyone who would call it in would be considered a newbie, or worse, a narc.

Without a word, Bernard approached the counter. He rested his bag on top and opened it, the sound of the zipper seeming extraordinarily loud as it broke the silence. Inside was a pile of money, small denominations bills fastened in bundles with elastic bands. The pawn shop owner took a look in the bag and then, as he picked it up and turned, he motioned with his head for Bernard to follow him into the back of the store. The smoke from the cigarette left a trail in the musty air.

Five minutes later, Bernard left the pawnshop, carrying the bag with some strain and nervously looking

around. He then walked quickly toward the nearest subway entrance and disappeared down the stairs.

UNDER SURVEILLANCE

ACROSS THE city in Manhattan, the lights went off in one of the two bedrooms of a tenth floor apartment as a girl returned to the single, open living space. It had varnished wood floors and was sparsely decorated and very well kept. Music played loudly from a laptop that sat on a desk next to one of the walls.

Dressed in a black t-shirt and faded and tattered blue jeans, Meghan sat on the floor and pushed her long hair over her shoulders. As she crossed her legs, the rip in the knees of her jeans gaped open like a child's drawing of toothless monsters.

A large canvas was in front of her with numerous photographs cut from magazines scattered around. One small section of the collage she was creating stood out against the white canvas like a harlequin's hat discarded in the snow. Carefully, Meghan's long thin fingers, the nails still covered in black polish, danced over the pictures

on the floor until she spotted one she wanted. Then, after working out the exact place she wanted it, she carefully applied some glue and positioned the picture amongst the others. She was just looking for the next picture when she heard a key in the lock of her door and she looked up.

“Alex?” she called as she heard the door close again.

“Yeah it’s me,” replied Alex as she entered the short, narrow hallway. Meghan turned her attention back to her artwork.

“How was the audition?” Meghan asked as she perused her cuttings once more. “You’ve been gone all day.”

“Okay,” replied Alex. But the tone of her voice belied her words. Her voice was shaky, causing Meghan to look up. Alex walked quickly to the bathroom. Meghan eyed the back of Alex’s jacket. In one place it was ripped. Her jacket was scuffed up and covered in grime.

“What happened?” Meghan asked with genuine concern. “You get in a fight? You get robbed?”

“No,” replied Alex, already sounding as if she were about to cry.

Alex went into the bathroom and the door closed behind her. Meghan got up and walked to the door and tapped gently on it.

“Are you okay?” she asked, but Alex didn’t reply.

Meghan waited patiently outside the bathroom until she heard the toilet flush and the sound of water in the

sink. As soon as Alex came out, Meghan took both of Alex's arms in her hands and looked directly into her friend's face.

"What happened?"

"I don't..." said Alex, turning her head away.

"What happened to you?" interrupted Meghan forcefully. Meghan noticed Alex's jacket, covered with grime, and torn, one of the patches ripped off. "What happened to your jacket? Did you get robbed? Tell me."

Alex turned away. Meghan moved with her, so she was looking Alex directly in the face. Then, Alex looked up and their eyes met. Alex started to cry.

Meghan stepped forward, and hugged Alex, but Alex pulled away and sat, ever so carefully, on the living room sofa. Meghan turned the music down and resumed her place on the floor, but faced Alex, who now began, haltingly, to tell her story.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

OUTSIDE ON the fire escape, with a good view into the living room where Alex and Meghan were talking, Jill sat, perched on a rusty step. As a freelance paparazzi photographer, Jill was accustomed to doing this kind of work—sitting vigilantly, waiting for the perfect shot, usually one that captured a situation.

She could tell from the movement and their body

language that Alex was telling the other girl about what had happened in the subway. Then Jill sat forward with interest as she saw Alex unzip her backpack and pull out a battered camera with a distinctive striped strap. Meghan took the old 35mm camera and turned it over in their hands. Meghan's eyes widened with excitement and she asked Alex some questions. Then, they both laughed. Meghan handed the camera to Alex who looked at it carefully. Judging from how they examined it, the camera appeared to be someone else's.

An old 35-millimeter aluminum hard body with telephoto lens. Jill wondered. Whose camera?

Suddenly, she remembered something.

She quickly reached to get her own camera from her backpack. She turned it on and flicked through all the photos until she stopped at one. Then, as she zoomed in on the image, she smiled to herself. The image was one of those of Egan rescuing Alex. In most of the images, he was moving so fast he was just a blur, but when he had to change direction and launch himself off the platform after Alex, he'd needed to slow down a little. In this picture of him one thing stood out, a distinctive striped object hanging out of the guy's jacket pocket.

Now understanding what had happened, Jill put her camera down on her lap and returned to watching the two girls. The other girl looked excited about something and then, Alex's look of despair turned to a more hopeful

one, and then even brief laughter. As the other girl talked animatedly about something, she constantly turned and twisted the camera in her hands. Alex now seemed to look angry. Intrigued as to what they could be talking about, Jill lifted her camera and zoomed in on the two friends.

“So what are you arguing about?” Jill said to herself and then, lowering the camera quickly, she snapped her head to one side. She suddenly sensed that she herself was being watched.

Standing on the edge of a rooftop across the street, Egan’s eyes tracked between Jill and Alex and Meghan. Egan could see everything as if he had a zoom lens much bigger than Jill’s but, in the darkness, she could not see him at all. Egan’s eyes left Jill and moved back to the inside of the apartment. He focused again on Meghan and Alex.

Across the street from Alex and Meghan, in another tenth floor apartment, stood an elderly man. He leaned out the window of his cluttered apartment. In his hands, he held a pair of binoculars. He lifted them to his eyes and looked at Jill sitting on the fire escape.

“Think you’re clever, huh?” he said.

He put down his binoculars with thud on a nearby table, and picked up a powerful flashlight. He aimed it at Jill. He turned it on and off. The powerful light exposed her location on the fire escape, and even lit up the exterior of the entire tenth floor of the building.

Meghan and Alex saw the flashing light, walked to the

kitchen, and lowered the vertical blinds. Jill put her hand up to protect her eyes. The light was no longer flashing, but stayed on her. Caught by a bored neighbor or some kids hoping for a laugh, and her location no longer secret, she decided to leave. She put her camera away and set off down the old metal stairs, not worrying about the noise as the old fire escape rattled and creaked.

The elderly neighbor grabbed the phone from beside his bed and started dialing 911.

“911, what’s your emergency.”

The elderly neighbor hung up the phone. Jill was already gone. She had disappeared into the night.

Egan continued to stare at the window, hoping that Alex would open the blinds. She did not. Since Egan could no longer see what was happening, he turned and began to climb back down the side of the building.

He walked back to the cave in Central Park. He felt more hopeful. Rescuing the girl had given some meaning to his life. Also, he knew where his camera was, in apartment of the girl that he liked. Then he remembered the pictures he had taken, that were on the film role inside the camera. The ones of Alex and Meghan talking on the platform. The ones of Alex crying. He had made it to the world above, and even found the location of the camera and the girl. This was a good start. But, this was only the beginning of his journey. He needed to get the camera back.

COMPLICATIONS

THE FOLLOWING morning, around eleven o'clock, Gregory Wells waited nervously in a semi-crowded café near Central Park. It was a brightly decorated place, with old pine tables, lemon-colored walls, and abstract paintings in blues and greens.

Gregory never touched the coffee in front of him. Instead, he fidgeted with his napkin and his eyes darted around the room from the newspaper on his table to the entrance, to other people, to the newspaper, then back to the entrance again. This wasn't typical behavior for Gregory, who was in the business of negotiating million dollar real estate deals and had learned to act calmly no matter the amount of money at stake. But this was different. He was waiting for his daughter. And the night before, she had attempted suicide.

The paper that sat before him had Alex's suicide attempt as the cover story. On the front page were two

of Jill's pictures— a picture of Alex's leap in front of the train and a blurry figure grabbing her midair, and a smaller picture, at the bottom right, of Alex crying on the subway platform. Across the top read: "Subway Superhero Saves Actress!" The cover picture and headline looked fantastic and unreal, like something out of a science fiction tabloid magazine. The front cover story had resulted in the paper selling out within the first hour at the newsstands that peppered various locations at kiosks in the subway and vendors on the street. The story was, quite literally, the talk of the town.

Even from across the street, Gregory spotted her, wearing large sunglasses, twisting her lip nervously, walking briskly just as Gregory walked, and navigating her way through the crowd of early morning commuters. He watched her with eyes that shone a mixture of love and guilt. As soon as she entered, he smiled broadly, and waved her over.

She arrived at the table. He was trembling. He stood up and gave her a long hug. He didn't want to let go. A tear raced down his cheek.

"Why?" he said softly.

She could feel his sadness and his pain. "It was stupid," she admitted. "I'm sorry."

He unglued himself from her, retreated to his seat, glanced at her, and looked at his coffee.

Sitting over at the counter, another customer looked

at the same newspaper Gregory had and pointed to it. The customer then talked to the restaurant owner, who looked over to Gregory and Alex, then nodded at the customer.

As they both sat down at the table, Gregory again looked at Alex as if he could not believe she was there. Then he looked at his newspaper again before he turned it face down on the table.

"Alex," his voice was trembling. "Oh Alex. My one and only."

Alex looked around, embarrassed. "Dad."

Gregory stared at her for a few moments again and then, when he looked about to speak, his phone buzzed. He took it from his pocket and looked at it and then sighed.

"Sorry, honey. I gotta get this."

Alex said nothing and put her hand up to signal that it was okay. A waitress came over and Alex ordered a coffee.

"Hello," Gregory said, covering his phone with his hand.

The guy on the line was his boss, the CEO of the real estate firm where he worked. Even though Gregory was, more or less, a partner, his boss brokered the deals and found the investors. The relationship had been shaky since the pressure was on Gregory to get an exclusive listing for an abandoned East River factory building that had just been rezoned as a multiple use building. The recent rezoning meant that the property was worth

hundreds of millions of dollars. But the union wanted it, and had made threats, including the warning he got from Rich, who had stabbed him in the leg while sitting on the bench in Central Park.

"The union is all over this," his boss said flatly. "They've already made threats. That's why you have to..."

"I can't talk right now," interrupted Gregory. "I'll call you in fifteen minutes." Gregory turned off his phone and put it on the table.

Gregory looked at his daughter with great tenderness. "Alex. Why? Why didn't you come to me? You can talk to me about anything. You know that."

Alex looked at the table, the ceiling, the walls, anywhere except at her father. She was wringing her hands, obviously uncomfortable.

"Yeah," was all she finally managed to say, before adding under her breath, "I tried to."

His mind troubled by the conversation with his broker, Gregory missed the comment.

"Alex," Gregory said. "I love you. You, you're my one and only." His eyes welled up with tears. "I don't understand."

His words hung in the air, floating uncomfortably above the background chatter of other diners' conversations and the clinking of forks off plates.

Amidst the prosperity that surrounded them—the well-dressed patrons with fat bank accounts and good

credit, who inhabited apartments in one of the most expensive and exclusive zip codes in the United States, the whole scene wreaked of irony. Even the scenario—a wealthy dad interrogating his daughter about her recent suicide attempt—seemed to be lifted from the pages of a screenplay for the Lifetime channel.

“What happened?” he asked in a softer voice, as he pushed the paper to one side.

Alex waited for the waitress to put her coffee in front of her. She absentmindedly added sugar and cream as she talked. Like Gregory, she was fidgety, too.

“I was depressed.” Immediately, Alex felt foolish. The words seemed hollow now that she had done the deed. “All these auditions. No callbacks. And this one audition, the comments the director made.” Alex shuddered at the memory.

“You’re still taking the meds, right?” Gregory asked.

“Sometimes,” admitted Alex.

He shook his head.

She thought it best not to say that she’d taken a lot of them the night before. They had wanted to keep her in at the hospital because of the shock, but they had no real reason to detain her and she’d simply gone home. She had only a small bruise from where her jacket had been torn.

Gregory rested his elbow on the table and put up his hand. “You’ve got to take them.”

“They make me tired,” she said, knowing it was a

poor excuse. "I'd been out with Meghan the night before and I was feeling good."

For a few seconds a picture of Egan came into her mind and it almost made her want to smile.

"But this is what happens when you don't take them," said Gregory. He reached for her hands and held them.

"I want you to come live with me."

"What?" Clearly, Alex was caught off guard.

"I want you to come live with me," he repeated. "You can stay in my guest room."

"I can't. "

Gregory put his hands together and leaned forward. "Alex."

"We've tried this before," she said.

"You're not well. Come stay with me. Until you get better."

Alex shook her head slowly.

"I'm getting better." She said.

"Why did you do it?" Gregory asked.

"I just feel like such a failure. I'm supposed to be an actress, but I'm not even working." She paused, looked out the window, and then down at the table. "I didn't want to be here anymore."

Gregory leaned in and opened his mouth to say something, but then decided not to. He nodded slowly.

"I saw the train and I ran toward it and jumped." Her eyes were looking down, seemingly to collect her

memories as if they sat on the floor at the side of the table. "Then, just in that second when I left the platform..."

By now, Gregory was entranced, hanging on her every word. Silence followed for the next fifteen seconds.

"I realized that I did want to live."

Alex stopped to get a tissue from her jeans pocket. Gregory waited for her to continue. Alex dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose.

"This guy," Alex continued, "comes out of nowhere and catches me in midair and we land on the island between the rails. As soon as I realized what was happening, I could see him running away down the rails, disappearing into the darkness."

"This guy, do you know him? Were you with him?"

"No. I was on my own. He was running so fast. Like an animal."

"I wonder why he ran off," mused Gregory.

"I don't know," said Alex. "He dropped his camera."

"What?"

"His camera, an old camera. It's not even digital," Alex said. "Uses film."

"Are there pictures in it?"

Alex nodded. "Meghan took it to a lab for processing."

"I need to see those pictures."

"They'll be ready later today," said Alex.

As Gregory drank his coffee he noticed that people

were continually glancing at Alex. Gregory glared at them until they looked away.

"So, you jump into the train," started Gregory, speaking carefully, "and a guy jumps behind you, catches you in his arms, and you land on the divider in between the tracks ..."

"Yes."

"And you've never seen this guy before."

Alex nodded.

"Where is this guy?"

"I've no idea," shrugged Alex.

"We gotta find him," said Gregory. "Maybe the pictures can help us find him. Did you see him?"

"Barely. When I came to, I saw him running down the tracks. He was far away, running into the subway tunnel."

Gregory leaned forward, fascinated by what he was hearing.

"My jacket," Alex started, "got ripped. A patch came off. Denmark patch."

"Did you see the patch?"

"No," said Alex. "What if he has it? The guy who saved me?"

"Are you sure you don't know this guy?" Gregory asked.

"No. I didn't get a good look at him. I was in shock I guess."

Alex looked like she wanted to ask him why, but simply shook her head. She wanted an end to the matter, but she knew her father. He would want to make a big deal of everything. Gregory's phone buzzed again, but he ignored it. Instead he took something out of his attaché case and handed it to Alex. It was a small black box, with a clip on one side.

"I want you to keep this on you, at all times," he instructed. "If you feel sad or depressed or, that you might do something, or if you're in a situation, just press that button."

"What will happen?" asked Alex as she looked at the small object in her hand.

"It's a transponder. I'll be able to find you, wherever you are."

"I'm right here."

Gregory took her hands and pulled her toward him, giving her a hug from across the table.

His phone buzzed again in his pocket and took it out to kill the call, leaving the phone on the table.

"What you did would've destroyed me."

"You?" asked Alex, somewhat incredulous as she lifted her eyebrows.

"Yes." Then Gregory realized that he sounded selfish.

"All you think about..." she muttered, shaking her head.

"... and others who care..." interrupted her father.

“... is yourself...”

“... about you as well.”

Gregory looked around the café again and noticed that everyone was still looking at him and Alex, and then at their newspapers with the “Subway Hero Saves Actress” headline. He picked up his own copy of the newspaper and showed it to Alex. Her eyes widened as she saw the headline and her photo.

“See the people looking at you Alex?”

She glanced around and then looked down, shaking her head. Gregory’s phone buzzed yet again and he now looked at it with concern. He grabbed it, got up quickly and shrugged himself into his trench coat.

“I have to go. Sorry, honey,” he said as he took out his wallet and gave Alex a twenty-dollar bill.

“I want to see those pictures,” he said and then pointed to the transponder that Alex had put on the table.

“Keep that with you at all times.” As he moved to come round the table to leave, Alex stood up and they hugged each other tightly.

“I love you,” he said into her ear.

“Love you, too,” she replied.

Still with a limp, Gregory left the restaurant and the waitress approached the table. “More coffee?” she asked.

“No, thanks,” replied Alex. “I’m ready to pay.”

“Someone already paid for you. They left a generous tip, too.” said the waitress with a smile.

“Who?” asked Alex, confused. Her father had given her money.

“They wanted to remain anonymous.”

Alex got up to leave and as she walked out she carefully scanned the room, looking for anyone that might be smiling at her as a signal that they paid the bill. At this point, most of the patrons people were glancing in her direction, so it could have been any one of them. On an empty table, she noticed a copy of the newspaper with her rescue on the cover. She picked it up before leaving.



A SHORT while later, in cramped newsroom with windows facing the city, two people were talking in a corner office. The newsroom was a mess. Old newspapers, photos, and news clippings adorned every surface, all of which were stained with the rings from countless cups of coffee. An old fridge rattled in a corner. A flat screen TV, on the CNN channel, hung from the wall. People walked to-and-fro, shouting and making lots of noise, competing with the incessant ringing of unanswered telephones. Edgar closed the door to try and cut out some of the noise and turned back to Gregory.

“So twenty-five thousand for whoever finds him and fifty grand for the guy himself?” Edgar asked.

“Correct,” said Gregory.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” Edgar said. “Once this is printed, there’s no going back.”

Gregory simply nodded and turned to leave. After a couple of steps, his hand on the knob of the door, he turned around again. “One more thing. I want to talk to the photographer, Jill.”

CAUSE AND EFFECT

THE EVENT—Alex's suicide attempt, Egan's rescue, Jill's capture of it on camera, and Egan's dropping of his camera had set off a chain of events.

The last of those on this particular day took place that evening in a Manhattan Art Gallery. A crowd of about one hundred fifty people, most aged between twenty-two and forty-five, filled the space. They stared at the displays on the wall, whispering to each other. Those drinking red or white wine talked louder. They stood in small groups, holding their plastic cups, talking, taking photos, and pointing to the art. None were dressed in what might be called 'traditional clothes.' They all seemed to wear something more suited to the catwalk. The gallery was in a run-down warehouse, but the space had been recently decorated and the mostly white paint provided a good backdrop for the works on display.

At a table near the back were plates of hors d'oeuvres

that the visitors crowded around, picking them up and rapidly popping them into their mouths. As far as they knew, they could've been eating asbestos chips and would still have returned for more. Also, sitting on the table were bottles of wine and plastic cups, with a donation jar, filled with crinkled dollar bills. The table was manned by a bored looking guy in his forties.

Like a bee searching for the best pollen, Meghan buzzed around from one small group to next. She was happy at the unexpectedly large crowd, and a bit drunk but capable nonetheless. She introduced herself to those she didn't know, saying hi to those she did. She thanked all of them for coming and answered questions.

Of those who were still walking around and viewing the exhibits, most were crowded around Egan's photographs. Meghan had printed and enlarged the best ones to pass off as her own at her art show. She had done them in traditional black and white. This gave a timeless quality to images of life in the subway.

Egan did not realize the value in his work. As more people arrived, a bidding war began; first for Egan's photographs and later, Meghan's own artwork. As it began and one of Meghan's assistants tried to cope with the barrage of numbers coming her way, Meghan stood to one side, trying not to grin or add up the early numbers being quoted. Her other young assistant, Abby, approached her, appearing frantic.

“They’re starting a bidding war, on the photographs,” said Abby in a hurried whisper. “What do you want me to do?”

Meghan looked at her, with a smile in her eyes. “Sell them to the highest bidder.”

The next person to approach her was the first she had seen in normal clothes. An impeccably dressed man in his fifties or early sixties came across to her, holding out his hand.

“Excuse me, Meghan, do you have a five minutes?” he asked. “I’m Gordy Felstein, New York Times art critic.”

When she heard the words, “New York Times art critic,” the entire room disappeared. Inside of her, fireworks were going off. Meghan hid her excitement, trying to remain totally calm as if this were an everyday occurrence. She took a deep breath and smiled.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

The ‘snowball down a hill’ effect did not stop with Meghan’s show. The following day, Alex’s cell phone was incessant as it lit up with incoming emails, buzzed with incoming texts, rang with incoming calls. Journalists wanting to interview her, friends wanting to talk to her, family members expressing concern, and, most importantly to Alex, casting agents offering her interviews and auditions.

In the past, she had given her details to a number of casting agents who casted for film and TV and theaters

in the New York City area. The envelopes and postage alone had cost somewhere around five hundred dollars. In hindsight, she felt embarrassed when, weeks afterward, she had not heard from any of them, not one. She concluded her efforts were futile, and thought that she'd never hear from them again. How wrong she was now.

Rather than having no offers and no work, the situation changed dramatically. Now, she had a number of offers. So many that she had to select the auditions that sounded the most promising. The rest she simply could not fit into her schedule. In a complete turnaround, Alex now had to choose what she took on, such were the positive messages from the agents as they arranged for her to go for auditions.

But things didn't stop there. She also began receiving phone calls and texts in regard to screen tests for upcoming roles in independent movies and TV pilots. As she traveled around the city that day, thinking about what she wanted to do, wherever she went people on the subway and in coffeehouses and restaurants seemed to be talking about her rescue or reading about it on their tablet and laptop. She also saw many people watching news videos on their phone about the story of her father's reward offers. The story, through the use of social media, was going viral.

The event was also affecting the life of the photographer, Jill, who had taken the photo. But Jill's day was somewhat more mundane. She woke around 9:30 and,

after a shower and getting dressed, she lay on her bed eating a Hershey's bar for breakfast. As she munched her chocolate, she again looked through the pictures of the night of the rescue and smiled occasionally to herself.

She really had done some good work that night. She put the camera on the shelf and felt something under her fingers. She picked it up. It was the yellow note reminding her that the rent on her room was due.

"Shit." She quickly climbed down off the bed and went into her closet.

She pulled out a shoe box from the back and took out a pair of running shoes she hardly ever wore. She seemed to live in her Doc Martens these days. They were the comfiest shoes ever. From one of the shoes, she pulled out a roll of bills, fastened with an elastic band. She laughed to herself, remembering her mother's reaction at seeing the Doc Martens.

"Jillian, you look like some out of work construction worker!" Even her father had laughed at that as well, and winked at her as her mother had gone off in a huff.

She tried to straighten up the bills to try and take the curl out them, but they kept rolling back up like a runaway window blind. Eventually, she began counting. She got to seven hundred and realized she had a twenty left. Looking surprised, she counted once more and she'd been right. She put too much away. With a quick grin, she pushed the loose bill into her jeans and put the band back around the rest as she left her room.

Let the old witch sort it out, she thought as she purposely squeezed the curl back into the roll.

In the kitchen space, which also served as the living room area of the apartment, the number of empty pizza boxes had grown, as had the volume of diet soda cans.

It's like walking into a dumpster, Jill thought.

Just walking into the kitchen put her in a bad mood.

More than once, Jill had offered to clean the place, but her roommate demanded that nothing be moved, that Jill would have to clean around the clutter of broken objects, and that Jill would have to use environmentally safe cleaning products that would be no match for a place this dirty. Ugghhhh!

Sitting in the filthy kitchen, alongside the wall just outside Jill's room, was a small table, big enough for two people. The entire table top was taken up by an ancient computer monitor. The old woman sat at the table, staring at the dusty seventeen-inch computer monitor, with her legs opened wide in both directions. She was six-feet tall, at least. Her legs blocked Jill's door from opening and prohibited movement from Jill escaping her room. Why her legs were opened so wide was anyone's guess, but no one wanted to guess.

It was clear that the pizza was winning the battle against the diet sodas. The woman wore a bright purple jogging suit that was about two sizes too small and it accentuated the rolls of fat around her middle. As the

door to Jill's room clicked shut the old woman's concentration never faltered as she stared at the screen through glasses, fixed in the middle with a Band-Aid. Jill left the rent money on the table and the woman nodded.

"Want some tea?" cackled the woman in a voice that gave her the nickname Jill had for her. She always sounded to Jill like the old witch in the Snow White movie she'd loved as a child.

"No thanks," replied Jill.

She waited while the woman finished reading something on the computer. Then, she picked up the money and slowly counted. Jill laughed to herself as the woman struggled with the curling bills. When she was finally finished, Jill got another nod, this time of dismissal and she went back to her room. She got her leather jacket, put a camera into her backpack and went back out. She glanced at the filthy kitchen. The old woman was making a drink. As she pulled out the tea bag to squeeze it a dead roach was clinging to bottom of it.

"Fuck me," muttered Jill under her breath as she went out into the hallway.

Fifteen minutes later, Jill was sitting on the toilet in the bathroom of a local coffeehouse. The bathroom in her apartment was so filthy that, on her days off work, her routine included using the restroom of the nearby coffeehouse. She finished, washed up, returned to the dining area, and found a corner table, throwing her jacket on top

of it to claim the corner seat. She went to the counter, ordered a tea, and returned to the table. Almost unconsciously, she pulled out her cell phone and looked at it for incoming emails or texts.

A newspaper, the Metro, had been left facedown at the table nearby. She picked it up and turned it over and her eyes lit up. Her picture was on the cover.

The lead story was about the subway rescue, with Jill's color picture on the front page, showing Alex in midair, moments in front of an oncoming train, and Egan in a blur, in midair with her, seemingly holding her in his arms. Both fantastical and romantic, the picture was being looked at by thousands of New York City residents as they waited for their train, rode their train, sat on the buses, or in backseats of taxis, as they darted around the city. On the right hand side, near the bottom, was a smaller picture, a close up, of Alex crying while standing on the subway platform.

On page three, the story started, describing a short history of Alex Wells and her impetuous suicide attempt and offering conjecture about the mysterious person who rescued her. The narrative proved succulent for its New York City readership, stirring the pot of imagination and curiosity as to the identity of the rescuer, now referred to as the "subway superhero."

"... and father of the rescued girl, millionaire real estate investor, Gregory Wells is offering a reward of twenty-five

thousand dollar for the person who discovers the identity of the subway superhero who saved his daughter from an attempted suicide attempt. Once located, the superhero himself will get fifty thousand for his quick-thinking and bravery, said Mr. Wells.”

Jill’s eyes grew wider as she reread the last paragraph. She re-read it.

For a few seconds, Jill savored the thought that she was the only one who knew about this reward and then she looked around and came to her senses. The coffee shop was very busy and tables hadn’t been cleared, meaning that on virtually every other table she saw at least one if not more copies of the Metro. It was as if they had been breeding and multiplying like white mice in a laboratory. She put the lid on her tea to drink later, grabbed all the newspapers and tucked them under her arm before she dashed out of the door.

She headed for the nearest dumpster and dropped all the papers inside. She knew it was a futile gesture, but it made her smile. She walked off down the road, sipping her tea as she went until she opened the door of a small real estate agent’s office. The sign in the window said they specialized in rentals for rooms and studio apartments.

RENDEZVOUS

THAT EVENING, Jill was back in her room, lying on her bed. Even though her room was tiny, she liked it. It was clean. The bed was comfortable. The wood floors glowed from the incoming sunlight and even the incoming moonlight.

Her knees were bent and she slowly tapped her phone on her thigh as her brow knitted in thought. If her mother had seen her she'd have told her off for ruining her complexion, but Jill didn't really worry about stuff like that. Suddenly her face brightened and she began to text Edgar.

Reward guy. Want his #

She waited, knowing Edgar just about answered his phone all time.

I know.

Puzzled, she replied:¿

This time it was a few moments before she got a text with a copy of his contacts entry with a name and cell phone number. She was about to reply when her phone buzzed again.

He wanted talk to u. Forgot to tell u.

“Idiot,” she murmured to herself. Then, she thought of a remedy for Edgar.

Fish oil. Improves memory.

As she copied the number into her own contacts, she thought that, actually, it was quite unlike Edgar to do something like that. He usually passed on text messages straightaway. She’d told him he looked like shit the other night so he must be feeling like shit as well. She texted Edgar again.

Thank you!

Once the new number was in her phone she sent a text to Gregory.

*This is Jill re photos. Want 2 meet?
Subway photographer¿*

Yes

Tomorrow @ 10. Brooklyn Bridge

Very romantic, she thought, for a guy to meet a girl the same age as his daughter at the bridge known for wedding proposals.

She checked the time on her phone and decided to go out. Her backpack was set on the floor by the door so she grabbed that and her jacket and set off into the night.

A short while later she was back on the platform where it all happened. The frequency of the trains had dropped now and, after she waited until one had come in and cleared the platform, she had the place to herself. She checked around for security cameras, decided there were none pointing the way she wanted to go and, after taking a flashlight from her backpack, nipped down the ladder onto the rails.

She remembered that this is where the superhero guy had come from. She shone the light around but there was no sign and she ventured a little further in. Taking another sweep, she caught a pair of eyes in her light but they looked quite small. She stepped forward slowly and pointed the flashlight and almost screamed. The pair of eyes were the left and right ones of two big fat rats that sat alongside each other. Jill let out a small squeal and retreated toward the platform.



THE FOLLOWING morning, Gregory exited the cab and approached the courtyard at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. Gregory Wells bought a bottle of water, then checked his watch; two minutes to ten. For once he was on time for a meeting. He did not want to meet Jill where he last met Rich. Too many bad memories and his leg was still bothering him.

But he had certainly not chosen the bridge for its romantic history, nor because it was famous for being in so many movies. He had chosen it simply because he appreciated its beauty, with its graceful curves and subtle ornamentation, as well as the views from it. He wandered onto the bridge and then stood in the middle and opened his bottle of water, leaning on his elbows on the bridge edge as he looked at the water below.

A few minutes later he looked to his left and saw a girl about Alex's age walking toward him. He wasn't sure why but he had expected someone older. She had dark hair and wore a leather jacket that was a little too big for her slight frame. The rest of her outfit—a fitted mini skirt, black pantyhose and black Doc Martens boots—completed her punk look.

She was eating an ice cream and as she got closer he could see a hint of chocolate smeared on her top lip. Then a small tongue darted out like a lizard's and licked it clean.

She looked at Gregory but said nothing. Gregory was immediately intrigued by this young beauty. He did not want her to see that but he felt like he could not hide it.

She looked in a bad mood and he thought it spoilt her otherwise pretty face.

"Mr. Real Estate," she said, with a sneer.

"What do you have against me?" he asked, a little shocked.

She put her hands on her hips. "I've read about you."

"Yeah," he asked. "What?"

"You're one of the reasons why I can't afford a decent place to live," Jill explained. "That's what."

"Huh?"

"Calling the South Bronx SoBro? It's people like you with your bullshit that are making this city unaffordable." Jill was certainly on a downer this morning.

"I do what I do to support my family," said Gregory defensively. "I have expenses, too. And it's not me that comes up with those stupid names. It's the property owners who send out press releases to papers and online blogs."

"But if you keep doing what you're doing," Jill continued, "there won't be any families that can afford to live here anymore. Just rich assholes like yourself, perpetuating lies!" Jill was almost shouting now, causing other people on the bridge to look around.

Turning somewhat red in the face, Gregory had had enough.

"How dare you," Gregory said. "You don't even know me. You've never met me before and you walk over here like I've just run over your cat. I was where you are once and I've worked damned hard to get where I am."

He turned back and looked down at the East River, watching a boat underneath the bridge.

"What's your problem? Is that what you wanted to meet me for?" said Gregory. "To yell at me?"

Jill almost looked contrite.

"I'm sorry," Jill said. "I'm in a bad mood."

Gregory turned toward her. He looked toward Manhattan, his eyes moving up and down, surveying the buildings.

"I have to get out my place," Jill continued. "My landlady is disgusting. Roaches in the fridge and roaches in the kitchen fighting with the mice over the shit she leaves everywhere. I'm sick of living there. And this morning she said she's gonna raise the rent. Seven-fifty a month for one room. Technically, it's not even a room. It's a closet. In the middle of a shit hole."

Now seeming a little more sympathetic, Gregory looked at her once again, but Jill was now staring out over the water.

"Sounds unlivable," said Gregory.

"It is. I just need some dollars in my pocket and I'm out of there."

Gregory looked around, then walked to a corner of

the bridge where no one was standing. He motioned Jill over towards him. He pulled out his wallet and counted some money. He moved closer to Jill, as if he was going to hug her, and put his hand next to her hand.

"I don't need your money," she said.

"Yes you do," he replied, unconvinced.

She opened her hand to accept the cash.

Five, one hundred dollar bills. She looked up at him, somewhat startled as she tried to hide how pleased she was.

"I really need to see those pictures," said Gregory.

Jill nodded her thanks, folded the money and pushed it into a pocket on her skirt. She took her camera from her backpack, turned it, and nodded her head for him to come closer. Once she'd sorted through last week's pictures, she slowed her thumb movements, stopping at the first picture of Alex.

"Can I?" He took it from her hands as if it was made of fragile china.

"Push that button there, that way," she said pointing. Then she added more quietly, "I still don't understand what happened and I was there."

Gregory's eyes were transfixed on the images and he kept his hands on the camera, even as the fingers on his right hand began to tremble, a sign of nervousness he'd for as long as he could remember. His eyes began to get misty. Overcome with emotion, his bottom lip began quivering.

He felt guilty that he had not been there for her. He had been consumed with work worries and sought a way out, but had not yet found one. Still, his daughter was the most important person in his life and he needed to remember that. From now on, he promised himself, he would. Even if he were to lose his job, he would never lose her.

"I'll never lose you," he said to himself in a barely audible whisper.

Jill just looked at him as he stared at the images on the camera and, for the first time since their meeting, she felt sympathy for him.

He stared at the images as he saw his daughter crying and taking the pills. She hadn't even told him she'd taken pills as well. She must have been really down. Then he came to ones where Egan started to appear. As Alex ran toward the train, then leaped, a blur appeared behind her, catching her in midair. Like everyone else who saw the pictures, to him Egan was just a blur.

"What the..." Gregory said.

His eyes raced around the pictures as he sorted through them again and again. He was riveted by the images. His daughter. Her suicide attempt. A rescue. Who was it? Why? Where is he?

"Maybe he was on drugs. That's why he could run so fast," he suggested, not really believing it.

"No. It was something else," said Jill, her mind back in the moment. "Something like I've never seen before."

Gregory once more retrieved his wallet and took out another five hundred. As he passed it to her he simply said, "Find this guy."

Jill took the money and looked at it. Stunned, she counted it out. She looked at him, then smiled. Then, she embraced him. Surprised by her sudden display of affection, Gregory padded her lightly on the back.

"Thank you," Jill said. "I'll find him for you."

DIFFERENT AGENDAS

LATER THAT evening, Egan once again ventured out from his world via Togrul's tunnel. This time, he was less nervous. He found the same spot on the rooftop, across from the apartment that Alex shared with Meghan, and sat down. Alex had been out again when Egan had got to his viewing point, but she arrived back home a short while later. He watched her approach the building, and noticed that she was smiling. She bounced on her feet as she walked. The light had returned to her sparkling blue eyes. Although she was some fifteen floors below him, he could see her face as if she were standing next to him. Her beauty made him shudder. He could not understand how someone so lovely could be so unhappy that she had wanted to end her life. Egan had been unhappy for a lot of his life but had never wanted to kill himself.

As Alex disappeared into her building and he waited for her to appear again in her window, he looked around

the neighborhood. A few children played in the courtyard of one building while their mom stood watching them. An older man exited the building with a large black dog close by his side.

Why is the dog so close to the man? Egan wondered. He watched, curious.

In one quick motion with his arm, a white stick snapped open, doubling in length. The man resumed his stroll, tapping the white stick in front of him as he walked down the sidewalk.

He must be blind, mused Egan. He now realized that the dog was almost leading the man in the right direction.

Fascinated, Egan tracked them down to the end of the block where the man waited by a post that held some blue signs with a combination of the human's letters and numbers on them. The dog sat obediently at the man's feet. A few moments later a large vehicle arrived and stopped by the post and a woman got off. As the vehicle pulled away again, Egan could see that the woman with gray hair was elderly as well and that she also had a white stick. The dog then sat up and gently led the man toward the woman, its tail wagging furiously and then man and woman reached for each other and kissed. As they walked back down the street toward their building, her arm through his and the dog showing the way, Egan could hear his father's voice.

"Until you love someone, you'll never know what you're capable of."

Now truly understanding, Egan turned his attention back to watching Alex as she now sat in her apartment. In her hand, she held a white cup and she laughed about something with Meghan. Egan felt he could just watch her all day long, but it was more than that. He felt again that he shared such a strong connection with her, but did not understand why or how. It was just as it had been on that first night in the subway and on the train. He was drawn to her because of her beauty but also, it was almost as if he belonged more with her than in his own world. Then, if it wasn't so sad, he almost laughed at the idea because of course it could never be. He had read in a human's magazine about a story about two lovers called Romeo and Juliet, and about how Romeo used to stand underneath Juliet's window. Okay he was above, not below, Alex's window, but he felt he knew how Romeo had felt.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

LATER THAT night, Jill was back inside the start of the subway tunnel. She gripped a flashlight in her hand. Since Jill was a minimalist, she preferred a few quality items that she had kept for years. This flashlight was one of those items. Because she didn't want to scare herself by seeing the rats before venturing into the tunnel, she left the flashlight off. Also, she did not want to draw the

attention of any transit authority employees or cops. Hugging the tunnel wall, she crept deeper into the tunnel. Jill did not know was that she was being followed.

Moving as quietly as possible down the ladder behind her was Alex. It was clear they both had the same idea—to find the subway superhero. Alex thought she had found her rescuer.

Tonight, Jill was wearing black jeans as well as her leather jacket and with her black hair, Alex could only make out the faint shape of a person moving stealthily in front of her as light from the subway station reflected off Jill's back.

Alex stepped forward again and her foot crunched on a discarded chips packet and Jill spun round, clearly startled and scared.

"Who's there? Who's that?" she asked, her heart pounding like crazy.

Alex realized her mistake. This was a girl about her own age. She felt disappointment course through her.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm looking for someone." Her voice sounded metallic echoing off the subway tunnel walls.

"Who's that?" asked Jill haughtily, thinking about her desire to keep the reward money for herself.

Alex was quiet for a moment and then said softly. "Someone saved me."

"You're the girl?" asked Jill stepping forward, her pulse now slowing again.

“Who are you?” asked Alex, now more cautious herself.

“I took the pictures,” said Jill.

With that, Alex turned and walked back out of the tunnel and climbed the short metal ladder back up onto the platform. There was still no one else around. She stepped off the ladder and realized that the other girl was right behind her. Alex waited for the other girl to get off the ladder herself.

Alex stood with her arms crossed. “What exactly did you see?”

“This guy,” said Jill, gesticulating with her arms and hands, “came out of nowhere. It’s like he had superpowers.”

Jill unzipped the front, top pocket of her jacket and pulled out a business card. She handed one to Alex. “If you hear anything.”

Alex took the card and glanced at it before she looked disdainfully at Jill.

“You just want the reward money,” Alex said. “You didn’t even try to stop me.”

“There wasn’t time,” said Jill, knowing it sounded weak.

Alex just shook her head slightly in disappointment.

“I’m a photographer,” Jill said, “not a hero.”

Alex looked back over her shoulder to point where she jumped and then back at Jill. “What did you see?” asked Alex more quietly.

"Whatever was in the photos," retorted Jill, now returning to her more usual belligerent self. But then she added more helpfully, "A guy... or something. Never seen anyone run so fast. It was like, he wasn't there and then he was but you couldn't really see him he was so quick."

Without another word and just a shake of her head, Alex turned and started walking away toward the exit, tossing Jill's business card on the ground. Jill went after her and caught up, walking along side Alex.

"We should look for him together."

"Why should I trust you?" said Alex, continuing to walk, not looking at Jill. "You didn't even do anything to help. You must have just stood there and watched me!"

"I'm sorry."

"Whatever."

"I was caught off guard," Jill explained. This time, there was an earnestness in her voice.

"When I get behind the camera, it's just, I'm a different person. Look, I'll make it up to you, by helping you find him."

Alex simply quickened her pace and started moving toward the entry of the stairs without saying a word. Jill caught up again placing her hand on Alex's shoulder. Alex turned and looked at Jill and now, seeing a clear look of concern on the other girl's face, she stopped.

"Wait. Please. Why'd you do it?" asked Jill, as she dropped her hand again.

Alex looked around, looked down, clearly still embarrassed and hurt. Jill was itching to get her camera out and take some more pictures of the striking face in front of her.

"You don't care," Alex muttered, but it sounded like she wasn't sure.

"I do," Jill said quietly.

"I was depressed, because of this failed audition. The fifth in two weeks. And I'm supposed to take..."

Alex rummaged in her purse and brought out a small bottle of pills. Jill grabbed it out of her hand and read the label. Jill shook her head, unscrewed the top, and took out one of the pills.

"No wonder you were feeling bad," she said, shaking her head.

Jill put the pill back in the bottle and then, leaving it uncapped, tossed it like a baseball pitcher across the platform. It bounced once on the edge and then fell onto the rails, the pills spraying like a white firework. Alex shot Jill a look but said nothing. For a moment, Alex looked as if she had regretted what Jill had done. But then, her look changed to one of relief.

"In the long run you'll be much better off without them. And besides, it'll stop the rats from getting depressed," Jill said with grin.

Alex still looked serious and then gave a small smile herself.

"Well I dropped a load the other night so they'll be addicted by now!" she said and then gave Jill a slight look of appreciation. Jill smiled back.

"When I came to, I saw this figure running down the tracks," said Alex with a faraway look in her eyes. "Never seen anyone run that fast."

"Anything else?" asked Jill.

Twenty-five yards away, Egan sat crouched on a signal gantry that ran vertically high above the rails. He had been observing Alex and Jill, and listening intently on their conversation, since their arrival.

He saw Alex and the other girl leaving together and he followed, a little way back but he was still able to hear. The two girls carried on talking as they climbed the stairs.

"He left his camera," said Alex.

"Really?" said Jill sounding interested. "What was on it?"

"There were pictures of me and my roommate, waiting for..."

"Wait a second," Jill interrupted. "Pictures of you and your roommate."

"Yeah," said Alex nonchalantly. "Of us waiting for the train. And other pictures of people in the subway. They were all, like, news reporter style, not standing smiling but taken when they didn't know."

"That's crazy," said Jill. "Was he stalking you?"

"No, I don't think so," explained Alex. "It was more

like stock photography. Like a student with an assignment to take pictures of people in the subway."

"Oh," said Jill. "So like a photo story or a study of people."

"Yeah," agreed Alex. "And there was these other pictures of some people who looked a bit weird, very pale ... white skin. I don't know really. They just looked different."

"But pictures of you and your roommate?" Jill returned to this issue as it concerned her. "How?"

"We were waiting for a train," said Alex, unconcerned. "I guess he was watching us. But they were good pictures. My roommate printed and framed them and then..."

Alex's face suddenly looked bothered.

"She actually pretended they were hers and sold 'em at her art show. They sold out."

"Ha ha ha," Jill laughed. It had been a long time since she'd laughed and it felt good. "Wow. Must have been good. I need to see them. When can I see them?"

At this point in the conversation, Jill and Alex were walking out of the station and onto the street. Crowds of people stampeded around them, racing out of the subway, racing into the subway, racing everywhere. Taxis and buses thundered by, as people stood bunched-up at the corner, waiting for an opening to cross the street. As soon as a considerable gap appeared between the vehicles, one

pedestrian—the risk taker, the stuntman—would cross. Hundreds of others would follow in his wake, creating a human dam blocking traffic. This was the norm, for this was the jungle, the concrete-and-steel jungle of New York City.

Egan, who had followed them up the steps, watched and listened to them from twenty-five feet away. Because of his special senses, he was able to see everything they did and hear everything they said. In spite of this, the crowd of people around him was too much. He felt bewildered. He retreated. He turned back down the stairs to run the rails before going home.

A THOUSAND WORDS

THE TREK to Alex's apartments took twenty minutes, two subway transfers, and a walk of three city blocks. They talked the entire time. Any uncomfortable feelings that Alex had toward Jill were aired out during the course of their conversation. Although Alex felt she would never be Jill's best friend, she felt that she understood her nonetheless.

One of Jill's statements was spinning around in Alex's head.

"People do the best they can with the tools they have," Jill had said rapidly. "Everyone does things with the best of intentions, even bad things."

Jill's pragmatic way of seeing the world threw Alex's romanticism for a loop.

They arrived at Alex and Meghan's apartment and Jill looked around in wonder. Quietly, she took mental notes of the apartment's decor, the wall colors, the arrangement

of furniture, the lighting, for inspiration for the place she hoped to get, provided she could find Egan and get the reward money.

"You want something to drink?" Alex offered. "I have tea, coffee, wine, water."

"Water's fine," said Jill. "No ice. Thanks."

Alex returned to the living room with water and sat down on the sofa. She retrieved a flat box, twelve-by-eighteen inches, from the lower level of the coffee table, and placed it on the top. She removed the cover. Inside were Egan's photographs.

One by one, Jill took them out, holding them carefully by the white borders, moving them into position for the best light. She studied them with awe and wonder, as if they were relics from an ancient Egyptian tomb. For a few minutes, she was speechless. Compared to images this striking, words would be nothing more than graffiti. Finally, she broke the silence.

"These really are spectacular," she said, with a shake of her head, and a silent wish she had the ability to capture images this stunning. "Whoever this guy is, he's a professional," she added. "The composition and framing of the people is just outstanding."

"Yeah I guess," said Alex. "My roommate said that everyone went crazy. There was a big bidding war over them, and she made loads of money. Lot more than she got for her own art."

"If a picture is worth a thousand words," said Jill, "these are worth a hundred-thousand words".

Alex took a big gulp of water, set it down, and then continued. "She even got interviewed by some famous art critic from the New York Times. She didn't even feel guilty about it."

Jill simply shook her head and put her current picture on the 'viewed' pile. She looked at the picture of Alex and Meghan, laughing together before they got on the train. The pose of the two was so natural. One could even tell they were a little drunk. Alex was leaning forward slightly as she said something and Meghan was laughing, bringing her hand up to her mouth as if what Alex said was slightly shocking. Jill's eyes moved rapidly, as if she was afraid to miss something in the photo and then her brow ruffled slightly as if she were worried. She looked up again.

"Aren't you scared?" she asked. "This guy has pictures of you. What if he's stalking you?"

"If he was doing that why would he save me then run off?"

"But why would he be taking pictures of you and your roommate?" insisted Jill.

"But there are all those other people as well, not just us," said Alex. "I think we just happened to be there when he was taking his photographs. Just like that poor old lady getting mugged."

Alex's words just petered out as she was clearly remembering something again.

"What lady got mugged?" asked Jill.

"We found some other photos, that he took of some lady getting mugged by three black guys. Looked like teenagers."

Alex pulled out another box from under the couch, opened it, and retrieved some 8-by-10 photos, black-and-whites, that documented the mugging. She handed them to Jill.

"Wow," Jill said. She looked through them slowly. "Did you turn these over to the police?"

"No. But we plan to."

"They look like teens," said Jill. "That is fucked up. I wonder if he did anything to stop them, or if he just took photos."

"I don't know," answered Alex. "But if he saved me, a complete stranger, I'm sure he did do something."

Jill returned the mugging photos to the box. "Where is he? We've got to find him. Did you get a look at his face?"

"No. When I came to, he was running away. The way he ran, it was like he wasn't even human."

"Maybe he isn't," said Jill quietly. Then she asked, "Can you remember anything else about him? Tall, short, fat, thin, old, young?"

Alex shook her head. "Not really, I was already

feeling pretty spaced out by the time he caught me. I was in shock. I expected to be dead.”

Alex closed her eyes for a moment and Jill waited quietly. Jill thought that if Alex had been sucking a pencil she might have looked like a six year old doing her first math test. At certain moments she looked like a sophisticated woman and at others like a small child. For the second time that night, Jill wished she could get her camera out. Then Alex opened her eyes, looked at Jill and shook her head briefly again.

“I don’t know. Maybe young and slim, you know, just a young guy. I do feel that he was gentle with me, you know, like caring. I guess that’s all I can say. I know it doesn’t help too much.”

Alex and Jill looked at each other and then, without another word, Jill turned back at the pictures. Alex stared out the window at the apartments across the way.

“I do know we can find him though,” said Alex.

INTO THE TUNNEL

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS later, once more when the station was quiet, Alex and Jill were in the subway tunnel. This time they walked into the darkness side-by-side, each careful with their feet. Jill told Alex about the rats. Alex tried not to think about them. Earlier, Jill had purchased fresh batteries for her flashlight, so the light was powerful, reaching from one wall to the other. At times it picked out old bits of debris by the rails and, occasionally, the light bounced off something metallic. Alex's role in their night adventure was to hold out Egan's camera by the strap, making sure that the colors could be seen in the beam from the torch.

"Hello, hello, are you there?" said Jill, her voice echoing eerily around the tunnel. "We have your camera. We're here to give it back to you."

They wandered deeper into the subway, walking along the worker platform that abuts the tunnel, each

with one hand on the yellow rail to steady themselves. Wind gusts howled through the tunnels in intermittent blasts, clearing out the smells of rusting iron, cement, stagnant water, tossed garbage, urine. At one point, the aroma overpowered them. They coughed and held their breath for a moment. Another blast of wind pushed through their tunnel, bringing fresher air with it. They inhaled. It smelled sweet compared to the musty odor of their dank environment.

Except for their footsteps, the silence was only broken by their slightly nervous breathing. They walked a little further into the tunnel but knew they could not venture far before the next train arrived.

"Do you think he's there?" whispered Alex, and Jill shrugged.

"Try again," suggested Alex.

"We have your camera," said Jill. "Alex is here to say thank you." Silence.

Then, the distant rumble of the next train.

"Let's get out of here," said Jill.

"No wait," said Alex, putting a restraining hand on Jill's arm.

"He's not coming."

"Wait," repeated Alex. "I think I heard something."

"Only the next train about to flatten us." Then she laughed lightly. "I thought you'd had enough of playing bumper cars in the subway?"

Alex laughed briefly before replying, "Oh, come on then." They turned around and headed quickly back.

"He's probably a criminal or something if he's hiding down here, not coming out," said Alex, clearly trying to hide her disappointment and pretend they had wasted their time.

"Whatever he is," said Jill. "He saved your life."

Alex turned and walked quickly toward the ladder.

"Hey! What are you doing?" said Jill, still standing on the rails. "C'mon. We gotta find him. We have to try again after the train."

Alex climbed up onto the subway platform and disappeared from sight.

THE MUSE AND THE MUSIC

THIRTY MINUTES later, Alex was now with Meghan at a cafe, sitting at an outdoor table.

“... and then she says, ‘C’mon, we gotta find him.’ And I’m like, right, you just want the money. You gotta find him!”

“You said that?” questioned Meghan, sounding a little bored with the conversation.

“Well, no, but I was thinking it,” said Alex defensively, lowering her perfect eyebrows.

“Of course she just wants the money. Can you blame her? It’s New York City. Ex... pen... sive!” Meghan was clearly more on Jill’s side, even though they’d never met.

This got Alex even more wound up.

"Look what you did!" Meghan exclaimed too loudly, causing people around to look at her.

It was clear one or two recognized her. They glanced at Alex. Then, with lowered hands, pointed at her and whispered animatedly to each like they'd seen a film star. Seeing their attention, Alex felt embarrassed. She wasn't a star. Not yet, anyway. She lowered her voice.

"What did I do?" asked Meghan.

"Saying you took those pictures and then selling them as your own."

Meghan, clearly insulted by this jab, looked at Alex with a serious stare. "I do what I can to survive." Then, her tone switched to sarcasm. "I don't have a rich daddy to help me out."

"He doesn't help me," replied Alex, clearly a bit hurt by her friend's jibe. "You know that."

Meghan sat back in her chair and said nothing. It was difficult to read whether she accepted she'd been wrong about saying Gregory helped Alex, or simply whether she felt she'd won the argument. Alex stayed quiet as well and sipped her coffee as Meghan looked around. She noticed that a few people seemed to be talking about Alex, but two guys at another table were looking at them both, their intentions and conversation clearly had a different agenda. Meghan leaned forward and whispered to Alex.

"There are two guys looking at us, at the table behind

you,” Meghan said. “I’ll pretend I’m pointing at that building so you can turn around. Wait, until they look away. Okay, wait. Now. “

Meghan lifted her finger dramatically over Alex’s shoulder. Meghan was clearly not as good an actress as Alex as she gesticulated theatrically at an apartment block over Alex’s shoulder. Alex turned around and glanced at the two guys sitting at a table behind them. One of the guys looked at them then said something to the other. Alex quickly turned back to Meghan.

“They saw me!” she hissed.

Meghan was subtle. She simply moved her eyes quickly in their direction.

“It’s okay. Uh oh, one of them is coming over.”

Meghan looked down and rubbed a finger along the side of her nose, seeming back in her role of the bad actress. Alex simply leaned back and picked up her coffee again.

A young guy about their own age, quite smartly dressed, approached their table and stopped. He was looking more at Alex.

“Hi,” he said a little nervously. “I’m Tom.”

“Hi,” said Alex giving him no encouragement. Meghan said nothing, but gave a brief smile as she sat back and tucked her hair over her shoulder.

“Er... it looks like you’re finishing up,” Tom continued. “Us too. Me and my friend, Pinao. Can we join you, both?”

Seeming unimpressed, Alex just looked at him. Slowly, Meghan turned to look at him, then at his friend, seated at the other table. He waved and Meghan waved back. Meghan turned and smiled at Alex. Putting down her coffee cup, Alex looked at Meghan, then at Tom and then her eyes smiled.

On the rooftop of a nearby building, Egan watched Alex and Meghan at the cafe. He saw the guy approach them and, unsure if the four knew each other already or not, watched them all talk briefly and then leave together. For a few minutes, he sat on the edge of the apartment roof. Then, he jumped to his feet and began to follow them, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. He stopped on the roof of an office building and looked down. The two guys led Alex and her friend into a building across the street. As the door opened he could hear loud music coming out.

Inside the club, it was loud and frenetic. People packed into all the available space as they danced, drank, or shouted to each other above the loud music. The pulsating music had a force of its own, driving people to do its bidding. On the dance floor Tom and Alex were together and Meghan was with his friend Pinao. As the track changed to a current favorite, the crowd shouted and yelled and danced harder.

Outside of the club, a sole bouncer checked the IDs of people at the front of the long line, comprised of well-dressed, good-looking Manhattanites and Brooklynites. Outside of the velvet roped square that cordoned the

entrance, a flock of models stood, wearing low cut tops and mini-skirts. They flirted with the bouncer who gave them cursory glances and told them to wait. Despite the surging crowd of models and noisy line at the door, the bouncer kept his cool, quietly checking IDs and his earpiece, waiting for the club to empty out enough to make room for more people to enter. Clearly, this guy was a professional.

Then, it started raining, lightly at first, but growing heavier as the moments passed. The crowd grew restless, yelling and pushing. A limousine pulled up to the front door and out stepped a well-dressed, up-and-coming music producer and R&B artist, followed by an entourage of models, a publicist, a photographer, and a bodyguard in dark sunglasses. At the same time the R&B artist stepped out from the limo, the deejay in the club was switching to another song, and the tune from a highly popular music track hit the ears of the waiting crowd. That was it. The combination of the arriving R&B artist, the rain now coming down in torrents, and the popular song created a frenzy. Almost moving as one, as if they had rehearsed, the entire crowd surged forward. As big as he was, the bouncer was not equipped to handle what had instantly become a mob. As the crowd rushed into the club, Egan saw an opportunity.

He jumped from the roof, landed on the street, and maneuvered his way into the middle of the crowd.

Within seconds, he was being swept into the club by all the other bodies around him. Feeling the bodies of eager club goers and their excited talk and laughter, he immediately felt like he was part of something bigger than himself. Anonymous, yet connected. For the third time in less than two weeks, he felt entirely alive. He had never seen or heard anything like it. The music was so different to anything he had ever played on his piano. It seemed mostly to comprise the incessant repetition of the same few notes. But, caught up with the fervor of the people packed around him, he started to appreciate it.

Like a fast moving poison, the rebellious music coursed through his entire body. All of it—the notes, the pitch, the tone, the beats-per-minute—shot through his veins. It felt like being possessed by some entity that also took possession of the entire roomful of strangers, uniting them in a single dance. It was more than a dance party. It was a worship experience. The deity was unseen but its presence was felt in the stomping feet and swinging arms and upraised hands of the two hundred fifty partygoers that took control of the dance floor.

The music pulsed deafeningly. Sweaty bodies. Arms in the air. A dense crowd, bouncing enthusiastically. The air was charged with anticipation and sexual energy. Nearby, a girl was hopping in place, wearing a loose fitting t-shirt that was drenched in sweat, her beautiful breasts clearly visible under the wet poly-cotton.

For a few minutes, he lost himself in the music and revelry. Then, he felt that he was being watched. He shifted his eyes from the girl's breasts toward the other side of the dance floor. Standing there, dancing halfheartedly, were Alex and Meghan, who were both staring at him. Clearly, their interest in dancing and the boys who invited them there was interrupted when they noticed Egan.

Electronic whistles and bells echoed through the speakers as the crescendo of the song erupted into the thundering chorus. A swarm of newly arrived partygoers flooded the dance floor, filling the space between Egan and Alex and Meghan. The fog machine blasted the cold, chemical-smelling vapors. Egan could no longer see the girls. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sweat-drenched raver elbow a nearby guy who tried to touch her breast. He glanced at Meghan and Alex.

Was it really them, he wondered.

A slim, blonde haired guy approached the sweaty girl, they embraced, and wandered deeper into the crowd.

Then, Egan felt it again. Someone watching. He turned, to see Alex and Meghan, standing only a few feet away from him. As soon as his gaze met theirs, everything stopped. As had happened on the subway train, Alex and Meghan were the only ones there. The music. The fog machine smoke. The people dancing. All frozen instantly, in energetic poses, like mannequins in a dance competition. Everything was still.

Egan looked at Alex with the attention of ten thousand disciples, looking at the eyes of their prophet, waiting for their next command. Her eyes were a campfire of colors—green to brown to yellow to gray—that flared in the winter of his soul. Electricity went through his head, down the back of his neck, down his spinal column, into his legs, descending to his feet, then rising up into his stomach, his lungs, his heart, his neck, and back through his eyes into hers. In this moment, something indescribable happened.

He navigated his way forcefully toward her. The crowd seemed endless. The girl next to him, wearing a short and tight yellow dress, removed a bottle from her purse, uncapped the top, and dumped a load of pills into her mouth. She capped the bottle and dropped it into her purse. She now started dancing frenetically until she noticed Egan. She stopped and threw her arms around his neck and then pushed her mouth onto his.

Egan had no idea what was happening. Suddenly this girl had grabbed him and kissed him. He felt her tongue in his mouth. With strong force, she moved her tongue against his own. She tasted of some strong food he had never come across before and then he tasted something that seemed like the dust and grit from the mines.

A half-minute later, the girl released him, pushed him away, and then threw herself back into the frenzy of the dance floor. As the drugs began to take effect, Egan felt

his vision go a little fuzzy. He felt as if he was floating. A minute later, the full force of the drugs began to take effect.

The music washed over him like water and he forgot all about Alex and Meghan and the camera.

All there is here and now, Egan thought.

He bounced his legs and threw his hands in the air and started dancing furiously to the beats that echoed around him.

He did not see Alex staring at him over Tom's shoulder.

RAMPAGE

AT THE same time that Egan had ventured further into the human's world, so had Togrul and his dedicated group of followers, but their numbers had now grown to ten. One of the new people was Ramone. Determined to see and experience more of life in the streets of New York City, they planned to go exploring. But destiny was to play a hand in their adventures and they were very soon to step up to a much higher level of excitement than they could have wished for.

As they left Central Park they listened to the conversation between two men. Both large guys in their twenties, one of them carried a heavy looking black travel bag. They were on their way to a drug exchange. They got into a large black car and Togrul and the others decided to follow them.

As the car wound its way through streets that changed from bright and clean to dark and dirty, Togrul

and his followers jumped from one rooftop to another, their speed easily allowing them to keep the car in view. Fifteen minutes into their pursuit, Togrul and his followers leaped from a two-story building, landing skillfully on the ground of a narrow alley. The car roared down the alley and turned abruptly, its wheels squealing, before disappearing out of view.

A rusting fire escape zigzagged its way up the warehouses brick wall. Its bottom ladder dangled temptingly, ten feet above the ground. Togrul ran toward it. Some fifteen feet away, he jumped into the air. Like an Olympic gymnast in a long-jump competition, he sailed through the air, arching his back and pedaling his legs as if he were riding an invisible bicycle. His hands grabbed the bottom rung. Using his forward momentum, he swung his legs upward to land on the fire escape platform. Then, he quickly navigated his way up the ladder rungs with his group following close behind. In the darkness, ascending the fire escape with such speed, they looked like skinny, pale monkeys. At the rooftop, they followed the sounds of the car and ran to the edge on the opposite side.

They found themselves on the roof of an abandoned three-story warehouse close to the East River. Other warehouses were around them. This one, however, was the worst of the bunch, long abandoned and left for nature to determine her course. Broken windows and faded paint. Signs with missing letters from the names

of long- ago shut down companies, leaving words they could not understand.

Behind a sagging wire fence was a graveyard of old and rusting cars, haphazardly piled up on each other like a collapsed house of cards. Between two of the warehouses was a narrow alley, festooned with piles of garbage and old tins of paint from when someone cared about the buildings. The black car they had followed was at one end of the alley. A low-roofed red car was at the other.

The two men got out of the black car and carried the bag toward the center of the alley. Each had a gun in his hand. Togrul signaled the others, then led them to a position directly above the center of the alley. Two other men, with darker skin and black hair, were walking from the red car. They also had one bag, a smaller one, and guns in their hands.

Togrul had read about the drugs business in the discarded newspapers. He wondered why people paid so much money for drugs. He wondered why people risked their lives for these substances. The curiosity grew inside of him. He wanted to try those drugs for himself. He also wanted some of the human's money. Togrul watched quietly, as did the other nine watchers. They valued being part of this moment. They felt privileged to be chosen for this excursion. His call to action to rise above the traditions of the clan had struck a chord with the restless mine workers who felt they had no options in their lot in life. The workers were ripe for the picking.

Togrul had a magnetic quality about him, one that drew other watchers into his orbit. Ironically, he did not even seem aware of it. A strange magnetism surrounded him. He had the ingredients of a leader—a low voice and ability to speak confidently and with authority, decisiveness, charisma, charm, an unwillingness to capitulate when the goals of others contradicted his own, a dash of unpredictability and another dash of impetuosity. A flawed, but perfect, storm with the potential to leave a trail of destruction in its wake. Togrul motioned for the followers to fan out along the edge of the roof. They did. Quietly, they observed the situation below.

The four men below approached each other slowly. The ones carrying the bags walked in the front, with the guys carrying the guns behind them. They met and traded the heavy-looking travel bag with the smaller bag. They took a few steps away from each other, laid the bags to the ground, unzipped them, and crouched down to sort through them, while the men with guns stood at the ready.

Togrul waited until the four men were concentrating on the exchange of the money and the drugs. Then, he gave the signal. All of them jumped down from the roof top and descended on the mobsters. Hearing the noises around them, the four men spun and lifted their guns and began to fire, but Togrul and his friends were far too quick. In seconds they were upon the drug dealers. Their guns were removed.

The watchers punched, kicked and clawed them into a pulp. In a matter of minutes, their faces unrecognizable, their bodies twisted and broken, the four lay dying in pools of blood. Surveying the damage, even Togrul was surprised at the ruthlessness of the attack. These four men were strangers, unknown to Togrul and his followers. Now, they lay dying in an alley in a forgotten area of New York City.

Togrul ordered Ramone, who'd had very little to do with the attack, to pass him the two bags. After he wiped blood from his hands on the jacket of one of the dead men, Togrul crouched down to see what he had. In the small bag were many bundles of paper he recognized as the human's money. In the large one were many clear bags with a white powder inside. Togrul grinned at the others. It was turning into a good night. What they wouldn't have known nor understood was that a watchman at a nearby building had heard the shots and had called the cops.

SOME KIND OF ARRANGEMENT

NOT TOO far away from what would later become the scene of the bloody attack, ten blocks south, just on the outskirts of the Meatpacking District, Jill threaded her way between desks in a busy Police department. A few guys nodded greetings, a few just ignored her and a few stared at her butt in the tight short skirt.

As she approached a desk a fat, bald cop in his forties looked up. His expression was almost as if it were frozen in a shrug, as if nothing surprised him anymore. He stared at Jill and then had a light bulb moment of recognition. Jill decided the bulb was very low wattage.

"I know you. You're that photographer." He slowly stood, like a bear coming awake from hibernation. "You need more leads on celebrity locations?"

"No thanks," Jill said. "Wallace, I need..." "

“Actually, “ interrupted Wallace, as he had a second revelation. “You still owe me for the last leads. “

Jill put her hands on the desk. “I haven’t got paid yet, but I need a favor. “

“I just said, you haven’t even paid me for the last one yet.”

“I will,” said Jill. “I need a fingerprint kit. Professional. And if you have

DNA... “

Try eBay,” he retorted nastily.

“I need it now, “ insisted Jill, her voice quieter.

Wallace leaned forward and lowered his voice. “You know how much those things cost? “

“I can give you a hundred now and then make payments.”

“They’re about a grand,” he said into her ear, and then looked shamelessly down at her chest.

“I can make payments,” she repeated.

“Follow me,” he said.

Wallace led Jill out of the squad room and opened the door to a dingy back staircase, the only light was the low light emitted from the emergency exits.

“Where are we going?” asked Jill a little nervously.

Wallace ignored her question and carried on down the stairs until they got to a darkened basement. The room was crowded with old boxes of files, all gathering dust in the gloom.

"I don't wanna be down here," said Jill shuddering.

"You want the kit?" interrupted Wallace as he closed the door behind them and the click of the lock echoed off the bare brick walls. Now feeling scared, Jill wrapped her arms across her chest as she stood with her back to an old wobbly table.

"I can get it for you, okay?" he said moving toward her.

"Okay," she replied nervously, trying to back away but the table blocked her.

"Provided we come to some kind of... err.... arrangement," he said with a leer and stared again at her chest.

Starting to get his meaning, Jill looked to her left, pursed her lips and then looked at the floor.

"Arrangement?" Jill muttered, pretending she didn't know what direction all this was heading and desperately hoping she was wrong.

Wallace looked at her with a smirk, like the school yard bully he probably once was. He nodded and there was no doubting his meaning now.

Wallace looked shamelessly down at her chest, the rise and fall of her perky breasts against her fitted jacket. A glint appeared in his eye. His eyes lit up. His vacant eyes flared, just for a moment, as if someone had flicked a non-working lighter in a gray tunnel. The sparks flashed then disappeared. His eyes moved slowly from her breast to her neck to her mouth to her eyes. She looked immedi-

ately away. Her eyes darted in all directions, everywhere but his gaze.

"What are you gonna do for me," Wallace said. It wasn't a question.

"A hand job?" Jill asked nervously. The words sounded foreign coming from her lips.

She could not believe she was asking him this. If her activist friends who she had lived with for two years in Gainesville, Florida had heard what she had just said, they would not believe it was even her. Then again, that was Gainesville, Florida and she was only nineteen years old at the time. She was now twenty-two years old, even though she felt thirty. And this was New York City. Different rules. She needed money. And what other options did she have? She had to get out of the roach-infested apartment she currently lived.

"A hand job," Jill repeated. This time, it was not a question.

"To start," said Wallace. He grabbed her butt with one meaty hand and pressed himself into her.

Jill tried to push him away but he was twice her weight and much stronger. "I... I... I changed my mind," she stuttered.

"Too late," grunted Wallace. "The order has already been put in."

He put his other hand on her shoulder and then moved it down to her breast. He squeezed it viciously

through her t-shirt and bra and Jill yelped. Then, still grinding his hips against hers, he pushed his hand underneath her t-shirt and bra.

"I don't wanna," said Jill desperately.

"You don't wanna what?" interrupted Wallace, as his squeezed her nipple.

Jill winced and tried again to wriggle free.

"Stop, please stop."

This time, Jill was more forceful. She tried to knee him in his groin but he was pressed too close to her. Instead, she tried to push his face and dug her nails into his cheek. Wallace shook his head as he winced and, moving surprisingly quickly for his size. He pulled his hand from under her clothes and grabbed his gun from a holster on the back of his belt. He stuck it against Jill's head. She froze and he backed away from her but kept the gun pointed at her.

"Take off the jacket and skirt," he said, his cold voice leaving no doubt about how serious he was. Jill did as she was told. "Now the t-shirt."

Her hands shaking madly, Jill struggled to grab the bottom of her t-shirt properly but eventually she managed it. As she stood there in her bra and panties, tears began to trickle down her face.

"Please," she said, her voice cracking up. "I'll give you a hand job, a blow job, but not this."

Wallace just shook his head and, with his gun in one hand, he began to unfasten his pants with the other.

"The bra and panties," he said. His pants dropped to the floor. He stepped out of them and Jill could see the disgusting bulge in his boxers. She just wanted to puke.

"Take it off," he waved the gun at her bra.

She reached behind her back, unhooked her bra, and brought up her right hand to catch it. Her breasts fell out, and she crossed her arms over them.

"Drop your hands," commanded Wallace.

She did. Her breasts now exposed, pale, round and petite, her nipples sticking straight out like thumbtacks.

"Mmm, nice." Wallace stared at her breasts. "Your panties," he said. His voice sounded hollow.

"I can give..." Jill started.

"Shut the fuck up," he interrupted. "C'mon." He motioned at her panties. She removed them quickly, and placed them beside her bra on the table behind her. Wallace admired her petite and slender frame.

"Nice bush." He pulled out his phone.

Instinctively, she covered her breasts and vagina.

"Hands down."

She dropped her hands and looked away. He aimed his phone at her and clicked it twice, then looked at it. Satisfied, he slipped it into his pocket.

"Now turn around."

Jill turned around.

"Stick your ass out," he commanded. "Up in the air."

He approached her. Jill felt his cold hands on her thigh

and another grab her breast. Then, she felt his midsection push against her butt. The air was suddenly filled with a crackle of static as his walkie-talkie, attached to his belt on the floor, erupted into life.

"All units report to West 12th and 3rd Avenue. Homicide. All units respond your position."

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. He stepped away from her and grabbed the radio. Jill breathed a sigh of relief. She quickly started to dress.

As Wallace replied to the call, Jill hurriedly put her clothes back on. He finished talking and fastening his belt, started to walk toward the door. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

"Don't look at me on your way out."

And with that he was gone, leaving Jill to stand alone and desolate in that empty, dirty room. Right now, she felt one in the same with the room.

FAMOUS ON YOUTUBE

TOGRUL AND the others climbed to the roof. He opened the duffel bag and handed out individual bags of cocaine to his followers and to the fresh recruits.

Togrul pointed to one of his most loyal followers. "Take the four new recruits and the three followers and return to the cave. We'll meet you there. Go now."

Ramone started to leave with them, but Togrul put a firm hand on his shoulder. "You stay with me."

Moments later, a light hit their faces and they spun around. Two men, one in a dark uniform and another in civilian clothes, had suddenly appeared on the roof from the fire escape. One held a flashlight at them. The other reached for his gun. It was Wallace.

"Freeze!" the one in the uniform with the flashlight said.

Looking petrified, Ramone seemed to be doing what the man had said to him but Togrul pushed a bag into Ramone's hands.

"Let's go!" he said.

Togrul and Ramone started running.

Wallace clicked the button on his shoulder-attached walkie-talkie. "We've got runners."

The flashlight silhouetted the duo as Wallace and the other cop jogged after them. While the other cop held the flashlight, Wallace held his gun, unlocking the safety as he jogged after them. The flashlight, a standard, cop-issued LED mag light, cast an enormous white, glowing circle on the escaping duo of Togrul and Ramone. Because of their speed, their silhouettes grew instantly smaller as they approached the rooftop ledge. Across the street was another rooftop, some sixty feet away and one-hundred feet below.

"Stop or I'm gonna shoot," barked Wallace. He thumbed the safety trigger off and aimed his gun at the quickly-disappearing shadow. Then, instantly, he thought of another idea. Quickly flicking the safety trigger on, and dropping the gun into his holster, he withdrew his smart phone.

Still running after them, Wallace aimed the smart phone in their direction, swiped it to unlock it, and pressed the video record button. Even from this distance, Wallace knew he could have taken them out, or at least, injured both of them. But, at this point, his curiosity overcame his cop instincts. He had to get this on video.

Do they actually think they're gonna make the jump, Wallace thought.

“They’ll never make that jump,” said the uniformed cop, echoing Wallace’s sentiments out loud.

The uniformed cop stood with his mouth open, watching dumbstruck as Togrul and Ramone jumped from the rooftop. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He stood there, frozen, except for his hand that held the flashlight, following them in their descent.

Against the huge circular glow of the light, the descending duo looked like ballet dancers performing their final act—plunging to their death, to be immortalized for years with an ever-growing count of online views. Wallace and the uniformed cop, both out of breath, watched with curious fascination.

“I’m getting this,” Wallace said to himself, his smart phone following their path.

Togrul and Ramone were in midair. Despite the uncertainty, they felt powerful. In this moment, they forged a bond that no amount of words could ever subdue, or time could ever diminish. Crazy with adrenaline, the rush of doing something they had never done, that was both dangerous and exhilarating, they continued running in midair, their powerful legs paddling the air in huge scissor kicks, their veiny arms wind milling in unison. From years of working in the mines, their bodies were lean and muscular and strong.

Ramone smiled. His eyes flared, like campfires blazing on a dry winter night. Togrul’s eyes carried a faraway

look, pensive and more philosophical. As the leader of this growing group, he knew that he held a responsibility that carried with it an enormous burden. With popularity, he could sense the enemies would be rising to confront him at some point, and he had a feeling that he would have to answer to the elders, if not sooner, later. As fast as the thought arose in his mind, it left him, for the rooftop was coming up fast to meet him. He could feel the responsibility killing the excitement.

The cops watched, as the entire scene unfolded before them in slow motion. Wallace held his phone out, getting the entire scene on video.

The other cop, like a theatre lighting tech with his spotlight on the main performers, followed their path with his flashlight.

And Togrul and Ramone, the main performers, held the audience with rapt attention, as they sailed through the air, their legs paddling in huge scissor kicks as they descended to the rooftop below.

Wallace and the uniformed cop ignored the crackling sound from their walkie-talkies. The incessant requests for details from the dispatcher on the other end would go unanswered for now. Normally, they would answer quickly, using police radio codes to signify the situation, allowing the dispatcher to respond with appropriate reinforcement. This time, hypnotized by what they had just witnessed, they stood there, one videotaping while the other did lighting.

Wallace and the other cop watched as Togrul and Ramone free fell for about one hundred feet to the next roof. They landed nimbly on their feet and continued running.

The uniformed cop held his flashlight on the two perpetrators, following their path as they ran on the roof below. Togrul and Ramone sprinted toward the rooftop ledge and vaulted into the air, clearing the thirty-foot distance and landing on the adjacent roof, continuing to run as if it had been a three-foot jump. They disappeared out of the range of the flashlight and into the night.

"I'm gonna be famous," said Wallace, his camera in the air. A few seconds of silence followed.

"They're gonna be famous," said the uniformed cop. "You're gonna look like an asshole."

Seeing the two suspects disappear, Wallace quit recording and slipped his cell phone into his pocket. He turned slowly to look at his fellow officer. The uniformed cop, feeling his stare, turned to look at Wallace. The uniformed cop clicked off the flashlight. His mouth was hung open and question marks seemed to be flying out. Wallace had an eyebrow in the air and moved his lips around like he was trying to chew on what he had just witnessed.



■ ■ ■ ■ ■

BACK IN the cave in Central Park, Togrul and his friends gathered around the numerous bundles of cocaine. They had taken the contents out and there was a pile of cocaine; twenty bags in all.

Ramone has just finished adding up the money. Togrul waited impatiently beside him. He'd already taken some of the cocaine and was feeling even more excited.

Eventually Ramone put the last bundle of slightly dirty money back on the cave floor and looked up.

"There is two million dollars as they would call it," he says, not really understanding the significance. It was clear Togrul did.

"For that," Togrul said, "I could buy one of the houses they have inside the large buildings. And have one of those very smart, red vehicles."

After the words left Togrul's mouth, he realized it was the white powder that caused him to talk. He wasn't feeling like himself. Normally, he was tight lipped about his desires and careful with his words.

"Why would you want that?" asked Ramone innocently. One of the others laughed.

"Because Togrul wants to live in the human world all the time!" said the fat follower from the original five.

Togrul shot him a look that clearly told the fat man to shut up and not share Togrul's thinking with everyone. Then Togrul grabbed some of the money and put that in his pocket along with the bag of cocaine he'd already opened.

"I am going to find one their clubs as they call them," Togrul said. "I think we need to celebrate. Who will come with me?"

The five original followers raised their hands. At this point, the additional followers were a little apprehensive of what might happen next.

Then the fat man coughed. "Like this?" He gestured at the condition of everyone in their dirtied and blood stained clothing.

Togrul, in his enthusiasm and drug-induced euphoria, had failed to notice their state. The fat man had reminded him of his responsibility to lead. Togrul snapped back into reality.

"We return to the caves tonight and hide the money and white powder," he said. "No one mentions a word of what happened tonight."

Togrul handed a bag of the white powder to each of his followers. He pointed to the fat man.

"You first." Then he threw a bag to Ramone. "You go last. Make sure you close the latch on your way in."

With some effort, the fat man squeezed into the cylindrical tunnel, and started his descent. One by one, the other followers trailed after him. Ramone watched nervously, then closed the latch and started his descent.

After they returned to the cave that only his closest followers knew about, they hid the bags of cocaine and the money. Togrul gave them a stern warning about not mentioning a word to anyone, then bid them goodnight. His five closest followers remained.

Only a short while later, after showering themselves

and speedily getting dressed in their best clothing, Togrul and his five closest followers, returned to the world above. Despite their attempt to look debonair, the bouncer at the exclusive club in The Meatpacking District area of Manhattan looked at them quickly, and nodded his head, indicating they weren't making the cut of being allowed entry. Three one hundred dollar bills, slipped to him by Togrul, convinced him to change his mind. He unclipped the velvet rope and waved them in. Their next obstacle was the identification check. They had no ID or no idea, either. Again, Togrul handed the girl checking IDs two hundred dollars, and he and his followers were let in.

Once inside, the five of them, high on cocaine and feeling empowered by the money, hit the club with the curious wonder of kids enjoying their first weekend of summer. They danced and partied with the row of giraffe neck girls who lined the wall, buying them drinks and remaining quiet, which added to their area of mystery.

The two guys on the bar were very keen to serve them. Still not really understanding the value of human's money, Togrul and his followers tipped generously. In fact, every time Togrul bought a drink he used a hundred dollar bill and waved away the change. By the end of the night, he and his followers were surrounded by a bevy of beautiful women and they were also the group that the bartenders catered to first.

FALLOUT

MILES SOUTH, in a rarely trafficked alley on the outskirts of the East Village, the results of the attack were being picked over by crime scene investigators.

A black BMW 7 series and a red Ferrari bookended the scene of devastation and carnage. The alley, which was lit up by spotlights, was roped off with crime scene tape. A group of crime scene investigators, first responders, detectives, and cops, dissected the scene. Beyond the ropes, ambitious reporters and photographers stood, requesting information from cops and lining up for shots in front of their cameramen. A half-hour earlier, the area was abandoned. Now, the scene was a carnival of cops and press and victims—some injured, some dead.

The two dead bodies were examined by a coroner, who rolled them over, and repeatedly checked for vital signs, before motioning for his assistants to zip them into body bags. A handful of police detectives were taking

photos and talking with Wallace and the uniformed cop about what they had seen.

Meanwhile, the newsmen and women continued requesting for interviews, but the police chief disallowed it. Instead, he agreed to give a standard response, "We're investigating the incident and will be forthcoming with more information as soon as we have it."

Small knots of cops stood around talking as others sought to keep the public away. This wasn't an onerous task. Few people lived in this quite desolate and deserted part of the city.

Wallace made the other cop swear to secrecy regarding the video he had taken. Later, though, when persistently questioned by Edgar, the editor of the Metro, Wallace capitulated and showed him the video.

"I wouldn't believe it if I wasn't there," said Wallace, shaking his head for perhaps the twentieth time since it all happened.

"Maybe they were on drugs?" mused Edgar. Wallace didn't answer as he watched the bodies start to be taken away. He thought about Jill's body. He felt frustrated and horny. He thought about what he could have done with her. Then, he remembered the photos he had taken of her that he would look at later.

"You said there were claw marks?" asked Edgar.

Wallace turned his head back away from the bodies. An arm fell grotesquely as the body was lifted. Only a

few sinews kept it attached to the torso.

"And worse," said Wallace. "Ripped apart. Like animals did it."

"Looks like it was the same people, who attacked those others in Central Park," Edgar said, fishing for his story.

Wallace shook his head.

"We're looking into that," said the uniformed cop. "But, we don't see a connection."

Edgar looked surprised.

"Why not?"

"Those weren't drug-related," said the uniformed cop. "Just some preppy kids first and then a couple out on a first date. They'll sure remember that one."



TEN SUBWAY stops away, and worlds apart, back in her immaculately clean room, Jill was sitting on the floor, wearing her usual outfit, jeans and a t-shirt. She was crying. She'd taken an hour long shower but still felt horrible. Despite being saved by the call, she still felt dirty. She had a bruise on one of her breasts, still sore from when Wallace had grabbed it.

She dabbed her eyes with her shirt. Something near the door caught her attention. A roach ran under her door and then stopped and appeared to look at her, its

antennae waving back and forth like they were caught in a breeze. Then the antennae stopped and pointed in her direction. She thought of Wallace pointing his gun at her, an hour earlier, and realized she was being held hostage by her substandard living environment.

With the deftness of a cat stalking its prey, Jill reached for a shoe. The roach held its position, but now its antennae swayed as if detecting movement. In one quick movement, Jill slammed the shoe onto the roach. She imagined it being Wallace. The sound echoed off the walls of her tiny room.

She held onto the shoe, stood up and walked outside of her room. Her obnoxious landlady was already in bed, snoring, sounding like a dull saw cutting through weather beaten wood. A crowd of roaches had gathered over the leftovers that sat on a plate by the sink. Jill nodded her head in disgust, then rubbed the bottom of the shoe against the edge of the wall near the ground. Bits of the roach fell to the floor, soon to be lost amongst the other debris that was never cleaned up. She returned to her room.

Her phone buzzed.

A text from Edgar: *Watch this.*

This was followed by a YouTube website. She clicked on it. Already with 3,281 views, it was Wallace's video of Togrul and Ramone leaping from one rooftop to another, at great speed, with the New York City skyline in the background. It looked unreal. Watching it, Jill shuddered

involuntarily. She was reminded of the speed at which the subway superhero had come out of nowhere and jumped in front of a speeding train to rescue Alex.

She texted Edgar: *Where from?*

The reply came back quickly as usual.

Suspects from murder of drug dealers. Same claw marks, etc.

Jill tossed the phone onto her loft bed, and looked at the bulletin board on her wall.

The board was a collage of pictures, Post It notes, and index cards relating to the subway rescue. The picture of the subway rescue was tacked in the center, with strings shooting out like spokes in a wheel to index cards with scribbled information. Post-it notes were taped alongside the strings with additional information. She grabbed an index card from a neat stack on her desk, jotted down notes about the recent attack leaving the two drug dealers dead, and the remaining two critically injured, and tacked it to the board. Then, she ran an additional piece of string from the center to the card.

Pulling her chair-on-wheels out from her desk, she sat down, then slid under the loft bed. She swiveled the chair to face the bulletin board and stared at it, moving her eyes from the center to different points on the string.

For a full minute, she gazed at the board. She opened her mouth and grabbed another index card, writing:

RUN FAST - LEAP IN FRONT OF TRAIN

RUN FAST - LEAP ACROSS STREETS

୧୨୩୪୫୬୭୮୯୧୦୧୧୧୨୧୩୧୪

She was about to pin the card to the board when she stopped and wrote something else on the bottom of the card. She added: \$25,000 REWARD !!!!!

She stared at the board until her eyes grew tired.

An hour later, Jill climbed the ladder to her bed and collapsed on the mattress. She stretched, looked out the window at the reflection of moonlight coming in, smiled, and fell asleep in her clothes.



THE SUN peeked through the windows of his twenty-third story, one-bedroom apartment. Gregory stood in his kitchen, drinking coffee. He'd had another bad night with little sleep. This real estate deal was doing his head in. The CEO of the company that wanted to buy the abandoned factory and re-equip it wanted, like Gregory, to keep the union away. That way there were big profits for both of them. However, the union guys were on his back about making it a union-only project and they, as usual, had the mob behind them. Because Gregory was still stalling, the mobsters were threatening, harassing, and obstructing him. At this point, Gregory was unsure of whom he could trust or to turn to for help. Unless

things turned around, he felt that his financial empire would soon collapse around him.

With his coffee only half drunk and going cold, he put the cup in the sink, picked up his phone and his car keys, and headed out of his apartment. Forty minutes later, he was parked outside the factory at the heart of his troubles. Gregory was inside taking pictures on his phone when it buzzed with an incoming call.

He answered quickly, interrupting his caller.

"They've already threatened me. Some guys working for the union. They want it to be a union job. I can't talk to you now."

He ended the call without another word and then, looking even more nervous and worried, he returned to his task of taking the pictures. He muttered to himself. He walked quickly to the back of the building, continuing to take pictures. His phone buzzed. The incoming text and the number was blocked.

"Leave this one alone. This is the last warning you will get."

He looked around nervously and continued taking pictures. Then he heard a popping noise outside and the sound of breaking glass. He ran around to the front of the building to see his car on fire, flames dancing from under the hood, and noxious-smelling black smoke coming from the broken windows as the materials burned from within. A black SUV sped away.

INCESSANT

AT THE same time that Gregory's car was burning, Egan was recovering in his room from the ordeals and excitements of the previous evening. Ramone had come around to see him and, as was the usual arrangement, Egan sat at his piano and Ramone sat on the floor leaning against his bed.

"The music, it was going through my body..." said Egan, almost with his eyes closed.

"Yeah?" replied Ramone, not really able to imagine what Egan was referring to.

"The notes, the musical notes, they were just so... incessant."

"Incessant?" questioned Ramone, not sure even in his own language how the word could relate to music. Egan ignored the enquiry.

"And the tempo just seemed to get inside you and then there were all the colors in the lights that were flashing..."

"But did you follow them..." interrupted Ramone.

"... and moving around so quickly..."

"... to where they live? Did you get the camera back?"

Again, Egan, clearly in the club in his mind, ignored Ramone's question.

"... and then, I looked at her, and... everything stopped..."

"Everything stopped? Like the music and lights?" asked Ramone, interrupting Egan's trance.

"Well yes... no. It was just... perfect..."

Ramone had read about what happened in these human clubs.

"Did someone give you something? Drugs?"

All Egan said was to repeat his earlier comments, "I feel so connected to this girl."

"She has your camera," said Ramone. "Did you talk to them? Did you get it back?"

At this, Egan closed his eyes, opened his mouth, remembering. In his mind, he returned to the previous night.

"I wanted to," started Egan. "But the music got louder, more people rushed the dance floor, and a fog went into the room."

Ramone tilted his head, puzzled by what he meant when Egan said 'fog.'

Egan, lost in the memory, did not notice.

"I couldn't see them," Egan said. "The fog lifted, and I saw them."

"You got the camera back?" Ramone repeated. He was growing impatient.

"I went over to talk to them," Egan said, "and this girl kissed me. Finally, she let go, and then walked away. I felt weird and forgot about the girls."

Ramone thought of his earlier question, and then made an assessment. "I think someone gave you drugs."

"Hmm."

"The camera," started Ramone. "You have to get it back. If it has pictures of us on it that jeopardizes the entire clan."

"Yes, you are right," said Egan. He sounded as if he was under hypnosis. "But it's more than that." As important as the camera was, Egan was more interested in Alex.

"You've got to get it back," insisted Ramone.

This time it was almost as if Egan had not heard and he was talking to himself:

"It's something different. I have to find out why. I have to..."

"Just get your camera back and forget about her!" said Ramone more sharply, clearly aware that he was not getting through. He was not interested in the girl, only with the recovery of the camera that had pictures of him on it.

"I can't..."

"I know you. I'm your best friend. I'm telling you.

Get the camera. That's your mission," said Ramone sitting more forward as if to emphasize his points. Then he added more softly, "That world is not for you..."

Ramone had not told Egan about his own ventures into the human world. He didn't intend to, either.

He'd been scared off completely. His last comment to Egan had almost been addressed to himself as much as it was to his friend.

"Neither is this world," Egan said quietly.

"The human world is not for us. Get the camera. Forget about her," said Ramone once more, his eyes trying to find Egan's to see if his words were getting through. They weren't.

"I can't..." was all Egan said.

Ramone stood up, shook his head and left without another word. Egan tinkered at his piano, then stood and paced his room, did push-ups, then laid in bed, unable to sleep. He felt restless, as if he was missing something. He thought about Alex and Meghan.

As soon as he heard his father's bedroom door close, he put a few things into his backpack, then crept silently to the cave door, holding his breath to open it and close it behind him. He headed toward the subway. He'd decided that he would go up into the human's world the same way they did, and not use Togrul's ladder. He didn't want to be caught doing that by Togrul or his followers. He waited in the tunnel at the subway station until the

platform was clear after a recently departed train and then leaped up onto it and ran up the stairs.

Near the turnstiles, he was less afraid this time and after making sure no one was close by, he easily hurdled the turnstiles as if he were just stepping over it. He ran the stairs and entered the world above. Immediately, his senses were bombarded. Beeps of the cabs, noise from the hundreds of conversations in his vicinity, music blasting from cars sitting at stop lights. Lights from signs on nearby buildings, car headlights, street lamps, and flashing neon signs.

He nervously looked around as if there might be an immediate threat, sniffed the air a few times and then walked briskly out into the night, navigating his way along the crowded sidewalk. Once again, he noticed many beautiful girls looking at him and this time, feeling more confident, he returned a slight smile. He was getting so distracted by all that was happening around him, he did not realize he had wandered into the street without looking and, preceded only by seconds by a screech of tires and blaring horn, a cab tossed Egan into the air. He spun around like a puppet that had suddenly lost his strings and then landed with a thud on the hood of the car before sliding to the ground. All around there was commotion. Some people screamed, some rushed to help and others even whipped out their phones to take pictures or video of his crumpled body.

“Are you okay?” a good Samaritan asked. “Why don’t you sit down. You can sit in there,” he gestured to a nearby cafe.

“I’m calling 911,” another person shouted.

As soon as the first helper got to him, Egan shook his head and stood. The looks of anguish changed to ones of amazement, and after a quick dusting down of his clothes, he walked off into the night. Those taking photos continued to do so, capturing this moment of seeming resurrection. Not really sure what had happened, but knowing he needed to get away, Egan broke into a run, disappearing among the hundreds of pedestrians that were enjoying the cool autumn night. Feeling relieved that he had not been hurt, yet cautious about being discovered, Egan thought it best to leave the scene.

Although he did not know it, Egan would not be the only one from his world to face danger that night.

TOGRUL'S NIGHT OUT

IN AN area of Manhattan known for high-end clubs, bars, and restaurants, Togrul and his five original followers ventured again into the world of lights and music, alcohol, and drugs.

Initially, they were a scrappy looking bunch. They were pale to the point of being almost translucent. They were petite, as Togrul, the tallest one, was five-foot-ten. And they were covered in grime from long hours working in the mines.

On his first night out, Togrul had taken note of the how the humans looked in public. This time, Togrul planned to fit in. This required logistics: a place, clothing, grooming.

After leaving the Central Park cave entrance, Togrul reserved a hotel room, on the Upper West Side. The three rooms cost \$250 dollars each. The desk clerk, who initially was ready to call security once she saw them,

warmed up when Togrul slid her a crisp hundred-dollar bill for a tip. Once Togrul and his gang entered the room, they took turns scrubbing themselves clean in the plush bathroom suite.

Their next mission was purchasing clothes, \$3,817 dollars' worth at Century 21, a posh clothing store, on the corner of 66th and Broadway. Togrul slipped three, one-hundred dollar bills to a wardrobe assistant, who proceeded to followed the gang around for hours, making recommendations, and disappearing to use the bathroom frequently and returning more hyper than before.

Their final stop in their exercise-to-belong was a high-end salon where they dropped \$700 on hair cuts, including a fat tip. This gang of hooligans and low-life mine workers, had transformed themselves into looking like young Wall Street types, out for a night on the town, with money to burn and experiences to accumulate.

As Togrul and the gang, spiffy in their new outfits, left the hotel lobby and stepped out onto the wide sidewalks of the Upper West Side, Togrul stopped, raised his hand, inhaled the autumn hair, then said with a smile, "My friends. This is our night. Let's make it memorable." Despite his calm demeanor, there was tremble in his voice.

Togrul threw an arm into the air. Then, he mimicked what he had seen on an old movie what someone needs a ride in a yellow car. He pursed his lips together and gave

a high-pitched whistle, a tone so high that dogs in a three-mile-wide vicinity barked in response to it. The yellow cab slowed to a stop. Unsure of what to do, the group stood there until the cabbie opened the door from the inside.

"What? You just gonna stand there? Get in." The cabbie said.

Togrul and his gang stepped into the cab and, like kids on their first car trip, since it was their first car trip, bounced on the seats.

"Shut the door!" The cab driver shouted.

They did. The cab driver zoomed off, navigating through the sea of cars toward the West Village. Togrul and his group, new to the experience of riding inside a cab in New York City, laughed and bounced and shouted and yelled the whole way there.

The cab driver watched them in his rear view mirror. "You guys are one happy group. I'll give you that much."

Hours later, and with thousands of dollars worth of cocaine up their noses, and hundreds of dollars spent on drinks, Togrul and his gang were surrounded by a bevy of beautiful ladies, high-priced hookers, and sleazy hanger-ons, both men and women, who hoped to enjoy the crumbs. Still full of the buzz of the night's adventures, they moved to the VIP section. Togrul had become the instant party animal.

"You got any coke?" A beautiful girl with a long neck and perky breasts, was at Togrul's side. She leaned into

him, her ample breasts pushing through her silk button-down shirt against his shoulder. Togrul just looked at her flatly. "Follow me," he said in his trademark low voice.

"Mmmmm," she said.

He led her to the bathroom, a coed bathroom with stalls that locked and had mirrored walls on the inside. The room was cold.

"You got the coke?" she demanded after he locked the door. He stared at her neck, then her breasts.

"Yes."

"Yes?" she asked. "What are you, a cop?"

"No," he said flatly.

High on coke and feeling lawless from the alcohol, he moved closer to her. Leaning his body against hers, he slipped his calloused hand under her silk shirt.

"What's with your hands?" She whined. "You a fucking construction worker?"

Togrul stopped. Then, moments later, he continued, moving his hands, slower.

"Something like that," he said.

Slowly, while gazing into her eyes, he removed his hand, then unbuttoned her shirt. She was not wearing a bra. As the last button was undone, her breasts fell out. They curved upward from the bottom, a near perfect form.

The drugs and liquor had removed any precursor

for moral judgment. Any wisdom was thrown out the window. All he had was now. Her. Himself. In a bathroom. On the seventeenth-floor of an exclusive rooftop club in The Meatpacking District. Watching her, he was consumed by lust. He knew he would take her. There was no stopping him. Talking was useless at this point. They both knew why they were here. Her for the drugs. Him to fuck her.

“What about the coke?” she asked. He moved his hand from her breast and reached into his sports coat, pulling out a pouch of cocaine from his inside jacket pocket. He looked directly into her eyes and moved closer to her. He opened the bag, then moved against her. Leaning his head to one side, he dabbed the bag against his neck, the white powder falling on his skin. She leaned in toward him, her nose against his neck and inhaled.

She slid her hand into his pants until she found her target.

She slid off her clothes and then, quickly, unbuttoned his pants.

Within minutes, he was inside of her. In one of the magazines that he had found in the subway, he had read that, during sex, women like mystery and spontaneity. So, he varied his technique.

She had anticipated that, because of his slim frame, his ability to satisfy her would be questionable at best. She was wrong.

As he moved inside of her, she kept her legs wrapped around him in a vice grip. She was shaking with desire. Her list of clients was numerous, and ranged in all shapes and sizes. But she had never felt this way before. Electricity ran up-and-down her long sculpted legs and rocketed through her spine to the nape of her neck, filling her head with electrical charges. Her body tingled and shuddered in delight and ecstasy. Her body trembled. Rivets of sweat trickled from her neck. A lightning storm was going on in her head.

High on coke and overcome by the moment, they writhed and shook like wild animals. Time itself seemed to melt into the floors. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years collided like colors mixed to match a specific shade of blue.

Togrul felt the pressure mounting inside of him, a volcano rumbling in his midsection, his heart beating wildly, adrenaline shooting through his body. His entire body trembled. Like the crack of a whip, he threw his head back and withdrew herself from her. For a few seconds he stood there, trembling uncontrollably, unable to move, limp, tired, useless, as peacefulness swept over him like a warm salt-water wave.

He collapsed in her arms. Both of them, a sweaty and tangled mess of torsos, arms, legs. The air was heavy with the scent of sex and body odor. Together, they looked like nude athletes. Her body was model-beautiful—long legs,

bubble butt, flat stomach, ample breasts that were perky, long neck, high cheekbones, a pretty face with striking features. He had the body of a construction worker and long distance runner—slim and muscular, with chiseled abs, rock hard arms, veiny forearms, muscular legs, and thick, calloused hands that felt electrical to the touch.

She pushed him away, slowly. She looked directly at him. Her eyes were tired, misty, glazed over. She looked as if she'd been hit by a car, tossed in the air, and landed forty feet away in the grass. Despite the fact that her body was gorgeous, her legs were open, her breasts were exposed, she looked like a limp handmade doll. A beautiful and sexy and exhausted model limp doll with an expensive coke habit.

Immediately, he felt guilty. Regaining his composure, yet still in a post-orgasmic stupor, he slipped her panties up around her waist, then her short shirt. He kissed her softly while buttoning up her shirt.

She stumbled to the sink. With a weary hand, she tapped the bag of cocaine on the sink's edge, leaned toward it, and snorted it. Eyeing her wrinkled shirt with disapproval, she smoothed her hand over it. Then, she ran her fingers through her sweaty hair.

"It smells like a locker room in here," she said, looking at herself in the mirror. "That was crazy." She admired his slim, muscular body, staring unashamedly at his midsection. Togrul stood there, naked, unaware.

Despite her tiredness, the coke took effect, turning her into a pretty-but-useless chatterbox. For Togrul, it was all noise, a loose collection of nouns and verbs run together in a boring helium-pitched monotone.

Sexually, though, she was dynamite. They had both gotten what they wanted.

“Don’t follow me out. Wait a few minutes,” she instructed.

“Why?” Asked Togrul.

“Because you didn’t pay me. If my pimp finds out, he’ll kill you,” she said flatly. Without asking, she took the bag of coke, ran her fingers along the top to seal the bag, and dropped it into her purse. “See you,” she said, then left.

Togrul washed his face and got dressed. He opened the door to the blazing fluorescent overhead lights of the bathroom and the echo of pounding dance music, staring into the wide face of a forty-something year old man. Something—a gloved fist—hit him hard against the side of his head. A sharp pain. Punches to his face. A ringing in the ears. An echo of voices. Then, there was blackness.

He awoke with his hands tied behind his back, a blindfold over his head, his legs bound together. His body bounced against a circular object. It smelled like car exhaust. He heard voices. He felt a smear of blood caked against his head where he had been hit earlier.

So far, the night had been proving to be physically

exhausting. Hours earlier, he'd been banging a stunningly attractive stranger, fucking her like a machine, high on cocaine. Now, he was tied up and taped up, in a cramped space, with a limited oxygen level, and the smell of car exhaust permeating the air. He struggled, shifting his feet and rubbing his hands. But it was no use. The duct tape and nylon rope was bound tight, professionally knotted.

What happened? Where am I? What are they going to do with me? They're going to kill me. I'm going to die. And for what? A night of drugs, alcohol, and sex. This is the price I pay for running with the humans, thought Togrul. *I should've never left the clan. What was I thinking?*

The thoughts of regret permeated his entire being, like a poison, causing his body to ache worse than it already did. He knew that worrying about it now would do no good. At this point, it was too late. It was over. He thought about the safety of the clans, and the teachings from his early years about the reasons to avoid the world above. He remembered how the world above became the forbidden fruit that he and others wanted to taste. He wondered what had happened to the others.

The enclosed space began bouncing, throwing Togrul up-and-down. One particularly sharp bounce threw him in the air. He landed against a sharp curved object. For the second time that night, there was blackness.

The smell of something pungent awakened Togrul. He slowly opened his eyes. Sharp pain erupted around

his eye socket as the dried blood flaked away. His vision in his right eye was partially-obscured from the lump beneath it. Like poorly covered land mines, his forehead and upper body was a series of swollen bruises. He smelled like blood, salt, and stale sex. The air was dank and heavy.

Earlier, he had felt regret. Now, he felt pain and exhaustion. The patchwork of inflammation—the swelling and bruises—flared over his upper body, feeling like headaches under his skin. His earlier regret, and his current exhaustion and curiosity, would soon give way to revenge.

“Water,” he gasped. “Water.”

A bottle of water was brought to his lips and turned upward. He gulped it quickly.

Once his vision came into focus, he found himself sitting in a chair, his legs and hands bound, in a run-down warehouse. A group of men stood in front of him. They looked like the men he and his group had killed a few nights before. The people with the guns, money, and white powder.

With keen observation, Togrul glanced at the entire group, noting their differences—their size, their stance, their eye color, any peculiar features, their mannerisms. There were five of them. All appearing to be thirty or older. Three were stocky.

One of the stocky ones appeared to be in his late

fifties or early sixties. He had a pot belly, and a turquoise handkerchief peeking from his coat pocket. His eyes were narrow, a permanent squint. Except for the rise and fall of his pot belly whenever he breathed, he stood motionless.

The other two stocky ones looked like unsuccessful gym rats. They looked like they had been to the gym, tried to convert fat into muscle, and failed at the attempt. Instead, they looked like two short guys trying to overcompensate. Their suits, which had fit earlier in the year, looked ridiculously small pressing against their supplement-and-gym-induced workout physiques. One played with his fingers, a nervous habit he had carried since joining this gang of hoodlums. The other chattered nervously, in brief, unintelligible word bursts.

Of the three stocky ones, the potbelly guy was obviously in charge. The other two were tall. One of the tall guys was shaved bald, and had arms like tree trunks, that hung from his wide shoulders like a vigilant gorilla. His eyes were vacant. He looked dumb. He tilted his head, cracking his neck, as he gazed straight at Togrul. The other tall guy appeared to be six foot five and two hundred fifty pounds. Neither fat nor skinny, he was just big. He stood with legs wide apart and arms crossed. His lips were pursed together and his head swiveled from one side to another, surveying the scene like a watchful crocodile. His eyes were almond shaped and gray and his face appeared as if he had had cosmetic surgery, even

though he had not. His demeanor had earned him the nickname of Shark. Of the two tall guys, this guy was clearly the leader.

They were dressed in business casual wear, sports coats, slacks, expensive looking shoes. Despite their differences, all of them had a presence, a demeanor that spelled business. Except for the tall guy with tree trunk arms. He didn't know how to spell. Togrul finished his visual assessment.

The leader, the potbellied guy, moved to the front of the group.

"We saw the video," he said with a sneer.

Togrul had to think for a moment of what the word meant. These did not exist in his world, and therefore, was not in his language. He connected the word to a meaning but had no idea how it could relate to him.

"Video?" Togrul asked.

The two stocky ones--the unsuccessful gym rats--stepped forward. The one, still playing with his fingers, said shakily, "Of you and your friend."

"Jumping off that roof," the other one finished.

"We have a cop on the inside," said the leader. "Then, we heard about some weird looking guys flashing cash and coke."

He started to circle Togrul. He waved his hand and the two tall guys came forward. They joined the leader, standing in a semicircle in front of Togrul. The potbellied guy looked like a midget beside the two tall guys.

Togrul still did not understand and said nothing.

“How’d you do it?” asked the leader.

The tall dumb guy with the tree trunk arms stepped toward Togrul. In one quick motion, he swung an enormous clenched fist into Togrul’s jaw. Togrul howled loudly, sounding like a combination of a wolf and a child. The sound echoed around the large empty space and a couple of the mobsters looked at each other and shuddered. Even the tall guy who had punched him stepped back.

After waiting for him to recover from the blow, the leader said, “One more time, before we kill you. How’d you do it?”

I’m going to die, thought Togrul.

Battered, bruised, wearied by the night’s events, he felt a tiny, almost insignificant consolation that he had experienced the pleasures of the world above, if even just for the last three days.

The power of leading a group into the above world. The sensation of the white powder that made him feel there were no limits. The feeling of sedation that came from the alcohol. The pleasure of having sex with a beautiful woman. For three nights, he had tasted pleasures of the flesh. And despite the pain and the current circumstances, he was hungry for more. Like other humans who’d been given too much vice without having the moral compass of virtue, he was already at war with himself.

Togrul shook as exhaustion hit him, instantly, like a giant wave smacking him against a sea wall. Even though he was strapped to a seat, he felt as if he was falling and tumbling. His body trembled. A craving was welling up inside of him. For the white powder.

The potbellied leader reached under his jacket, lifting a gun from his shoulder holster. The big tall guy, the watchful crocodile with the almond-shaped eyes, stepped forward. He moved with great deliberation, like a pregnant shark.

"Wait." The potbellied leader glared at the tall guy. But the tall guy ignored him, looking directly at Togrul.

"How'd you make that jump?" the big tall guy said. "That's not possible."

Togrul exhaled, a sigh of resignation and despair, a hot air balloon in search of a better view. His gaze met the big tall guy's gaze, and he had to look away. Togrul had a distinct feeling that this guy was only part human. He returned his look toward the big tall guy, then to the leader.

"We have powers," said Togrul, still wincing a little.

"Powers?" If it was a question the leader asked, it was rhetorical. It was more of a mocking statement. The others laughed. The big tall guy with the almond-shaped eyes did not laugh. Togrul took note of this.

"We're born with them," replied Togrul simply.

At this, the tall guy with the tree trunk arms and the vacant eyes, stepped forward.

"We don't have time for this shit," he said, shaking his head.

The two short guys, the pudgy, creatine-filled gym rats, chuckled, making mocking gestures with their hands in the air. The big tall guy with the almond-shaped eyes, the watchful crocodile, raised his hands. His palms were the size of baseball gloves. Togrul stared in wonder. *Definitely only part human*, Togrul thought.

"I think," the big tall guy started, "that we ought to think about..."

The potbellied leader turned to face the others.

"Kill him," he ordered matter-of-factly and stepped to one side.

All of the others stepped forward, moving as one, so well-practiced was the motion. The two short guys and the two tall guys, pulling guns from their hidden shoulder holsters beneath their sports jackets. The big tall guy with almond-shaped eyes moved with less certainty than the others. Even from ten feet away, Togrul could read the apprehension in the restless movement of his pupils, silvery-gray dots that floated in curious waters. *Something about this guy*, Togrul thought for the third time that night.

With the last bit of strength he could muster, Togrul lifted his head with pride, and looked at the armed men, one by one, with a penetrating gaze. His body, indifferent to his inner strength, shook with fear. Then, something happened.

A familiar scent caught Togrul's attention. He knew immediately what it meant: Hope. Togrul's eyes flared to life, a kaleidoscope of blurry shapes becoming a stained glass snowflake. He felt the big tall guy with almond-shaped eyes take notice.

"If I'm killed, your entire," he stopped to search for the right word, "operation will be destroyed in retribution."

This time, Togrul spoke with power and conviction, his voice a low growl.

The two short gym rats and the tall tree-trunk armed guy snorted and smirked. The crocodile's eyes rolled from left to right. He took a long, slow sniff of the air.

The potbellied leader walked slowly toward Togrul.

"Maybe we shouldn't kill him," said the tall guy with almond-shaped eyes. This time, his voice sounded considerably softer.

"You saw what he did to our guys!" said one of the short gym rats.

"Yeah. Fuck this shit," said the tall guy with tree trunk arms. "Let's kill him already."

The tall guy with almond-shaped eyes turned to the mobsters. "You saw him jump in that video. With another guy, too."

"He got lucky," the other gym rat said.

"If he can jump off rooftops like that," continued the tall guy with almond-shaped eyes, "maybe we can use him."

At this, the five mobsters began arguing.

“He can’t be trusted,” said the tall guy with tree trunk arms.

The more vociferous gym rat bounced on his feet. “He’s right. We should kill him.”

“No. We can use him,” said the tall guy, the crocodile, with almond-shaped eyes.

“Whose side are you on, anyway?” said the tall guy with tree trunk arms. At this comment, everyone got quiet. The other four mobsters eyed the crocodile suspiciously.

The potbellied leader took a long, slow breath. “Then what do you suggest we do?”

“The only thing you can do,” interrupted Togrul. “Join forces with us.”

Surprised, they all turned back again to Togrul who, despite his bruised appearance, had a small glimmer of confidence in his eyes. The leader looked at him with a hint of disgust, and looked again at the other four.

“This debate is over,” he said. “Kill him.”

Ba-blam! A thundering explosion was heard, like an amplified crackle of electricity. The entire warehouse was plunged into darkness. Sounds, of bodies falling to the ground, echoed off the concrete floors and corrugated metal walls.

Togrul’s sense of smell had proved correct. The cavalry had arrived in the form of Togrul’s most loyal followers. Any doubts he felt about the loyalty of his followers was erased by this bold act.

While the humans were suddenly blinded, Togrul's friends could see perfectly well. With a series of chilling screeches and growls, they jumped down from a metal walkway that ran along the top of the building, and threw themselves onto the hapless mobsters.

Guns were fired. Flashes of light from the barrels were gone in seconds, destroying any night sight the mobsters had recovered since the lights went out.

"Ahhhh!" one of the gym rats screamed. "We should've killed..."

No other words were heard, just sounds of bodies, punching, wrestling, groans, screams, footsteps running, gunshots. The acrid smell of gunfire wafted through the air. A full minute passed and there was silence.

As quickly as they were turned off, the lights came back on, revealing the scene of an epic turnaround. Togrul and his friends held the guns, and the mobsters were in a bloody and battered heap in the middle of them. One by one, the mobsters slowly lifted their heads. All had either split lips, bloody noses, or eyes that were already closing. They all looked in a complete daze.

Togrul, who had already been freed from the chair by one of his friends, looked over his former adversaries.

"What just happened? Who are you people?" asked the leader.

"Where's the white powder?" interrupted Togrul.

In one quick motion, he arched his neck backward,

inhaled deeply, puffed his chest, then rotated his shoulders and stretched his arms outward, to get the blood circulation going again.

"Fuck you," spat the potbellied leader.

Togrul calmly took one of the guns from a friend, and shot the leader in the leg.

"Aaaaahhhhhhh!" he screamed, grabbing his knee. The blood was already seeping through his fingers. "Ar-rhhhhhhh."

"I said, where's the white powder?" Togrul shouted to be heard above the screaming. "Is that what they're calling it now," said one of the gym rats.

"We can get you some, but we need you to take care of something for us," said the tall guy with almond shaped eyes.

The potbellied leader leaned in the direction of the tall guy with almond shaped eyes. "We're not making a deal with these guys," he stammered.

The tall guy with almond-shaped eyes looked at the potbellied leader with concern and understanding.

"There's a briefcase on that table," the crocodile said, glancing toward a nearby table. "The combination is four-one-nine-five. In it, you'll find a photograph."

"Traitor," muttered the other tall guy, who was nursing a broken arm.

One of Togrul's followers brought the briefcase to him, opened it, and retrieved the ten-by-seven photo-

graph. He handed it to Togrul.

As Togrul held the photograph toward the light, he could see it was a picture of a smartly dressed man, in a light colored trench coat, carrying an expensive looking attaché case. Togrul studied the details—a mid-forties looking man, professionally dressed, well-groomed, good-looking, with designer accessories, a Rolex watch and glasses. Beneath the picture was a name. Gregory Wells.

The potbellied leader groaned in resignation and pain, then glared at the crocodile, the tall man with almond-shaped eyes. It was clear from the tension among the mobsters that a new leader was emerging.

“If you want more white powder, we need you to kill him,” said the crocodile.

A SIGN

FEELING SHAKEN from the encounter with the cab earlier, Egan decided to return home. While walking toward the nearest subway, he had a change of heart. He witnessed something wonderful, something so beautiful, he took it as a sign.

Passing by a restaurant in the East Village, lured by the sound of happy customers in the intimately lit cafe, he peered through the windows. Inside, bathed in the orange glow of soft lights, sat a group of elderly people celebrating a birthday. They sat at a corner table and the birthday couple, who appeared to be octogenarians, were entertaining their friends with stories. Everyone at the table was laughing. And when the waiter visited, he leaned in, listened, and started laughing too.

Laughter. Friendship. Life. It is beautiful. Even though Egan couldn't hear what they were saying, he could sense the gist of the joke, and he started laughing too. He felt

inspired. He would capture the scene in a perfect black-and-white photo. He reached for his camera. It was not there! He was so overtaken by the moment that he had forgotten the camera was missing. Then he remembered. *I've got to get that camera*, he said to himself.

Light splashed across the restaurant window. Egan turned, looking at the night sky. The clouds had parted, like stage curtains, revealing a full moon. Breathtaking. Egan smiled. His emotions soared.

He felt a melody rising from within him. He looked around for a piano. He wanted to photograph the birthday group. He wanted to appreciate everything good in his life, but he had no instrument which he could channel his energy. The safety of the cave and the clan seemed far distant and strange. He knew, that by returning home, he would be missing out on something. Feeling inspired, he began jogging toward the Upper West Side. He would get the camera. Tonight.



OUTSIDE OF Alex's tenth floor apartment building, an old and rusty fire escape clung precariously to the brick wall. From across the street, the corroded steel stairs resembled a nearly-dead vine—neglected, dying of thirst, starved for sunlight and oxygen, poisoned by the exhaust of speeding taxis and buses.

The ladder at the bottom of the fire escape was a good twelve feet from the street level, to dissuade potential thieves, voyeurs, or adventure seekers. This did nothing to prevent the figure in black, wearing a zip up hoodie and a backpack, from jumping toward it. His hands grabbed the bottom rung and he swung himself up to the second story platform. With the agility of a professional dancer, the young man ascended the stairs with uncanny silence and terrific speed. On the tenth floor platform, he threw back the hoodie, took a breath, and surveyed his surroundings.

Ten stories up, on an east-west street of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, everything was different. It was quiet. From here, Egan could see the tops of trees and hear the birds rustling in and out of the branches. The air was a few degrees colder. Looking at the Lego-sized pedestrians below, with their agendas, their self-awareness, and their hurry, he wondered if their devotion to schedule and expectations satisfied their requirements for a fulfilled life.

I'm a fire escape philosopher, Egan laughed. This city can turn anyone into a daydreamer.

He sat outside the window that looked into Alex and Meghan's apartment. He removed his backpack, shifted his body into a comfortable sitting position, and settled down to watch and wait in the very same spot Jill had done a few nights earlier.

Wind howled through the corridor of the street below, then swirled upward into the night sky, leaving a pungent odor in its trail. Successive gusts of winds followed, carrying potpourri of odors—salt water, asphalt, concrete, and flowers. Egan's olfactory senses were assaulted. He knew it was going to rain.

Ba-ham! Egan ducked. A big clap of thunder boomed overhead, echoing across the city. He'd never heard that before. He looked around the neighborhood. No one else seemed perturbed. A few people were jogging and whipping out umbrellas. Most continued their regular pace.

A storm, he thought. He had read about those.

The view from this vantage point, and his unfailing curiosity about nature—both human nature and the nature of plant life and sciences—had distracted him. Reminding himself of his mission, he turned back to the window and his vigil.

From outside, the inside of the apartment appeared warm and inviting. The window faced the kitchen and looked into the living room. The kitchen was small, with a tiny, four-burner gas stove, a narrow fridge, a butcher's block, and a single row of cabinets that ran along the ceiling. Judging from the amount of pots and pans and plates in the sink—none—these girls did not do a lot of cooking. Prominent on the kitchen counter were a few empty wine bottles. Egan took note.

The kitchen floors were checkerboard, with a thin strip of aluminum flooring dividing it from the living room floors, which were wooden. Between the kitchen counter and the living room, sat a table with two bar stools crowded underneath it.

Ornate crown molding, original from 1918, ran the perimeter of the ceiling. The lights were set a half-turn on the dimmer knob, bathing the entire living room and kitchen in gentle glow. The wood floors, a honey golden brown color, radiated a strength and softness. A plump couch sat against the back wall with a wooden coffee table in front. A simple wooden table and an old-fashioned coat rack stood near the door. Adjacent to the sofa sat a smaller couch, adorned with a dirty white comforter and pillows. In the center of the living room, a three-legged easel stood above a burlap, paint splattered tarpaulin.

A door opened. Meghan entered the room, carrying a glass jar with a paintbrush on it. Her hair was tied in a knot. She lowered herself to the coffee table, and pressed a button on a small box. Music emanated into the room. She bounced on her feet in time to the music. The sounds of swirls of effects-laden guitar, keyboard, and drums-filled the room.

How can such a little box make music so loud? Egan thought.

Egan smiled, enjoying the bird's-eye view of humans from his perch. He stared at her with great curiosity.

She wore a t-shirt, peppered with paint specks, and baggy pants rolled above the ankles. The pants had paint-colored handprints on them where she had wiped her hands. Bobbing her head as she moved, she brought the paintbrush to the canvas and moved her wrist in an up and down motion.

She stopped to retrieve a bottle of wine from the fridge, then poured it into two mismatched glasses, bringing one to Alex. They both took big swigs. Then, Meghan returned to painting.

Egan noticed splashes of paint on her hands and face. It made her look young. He imagined what she looked like as a child.

What's she painting? thought Egan. He watched carefully.

The front door opened. Alex walked in, slowly, as if she was overly self-aware of each step. Even from outside, Egan could sense her insecurity. Alex entered her room, then returned to the living room, plopping herself on the couch and watching Meghan paint.

Egan could not help but stare at Alex. His eyes stayed with the beauty of her face for a moment and yearned again for his camera. Watching her, without his camera to capture her natural expression, reminded him of his original mission—to retrieve the camera.

How can a girl this pretty be so alone in a city filled with so many people? thought Egan.

Wind blasted through the gaps in the fire escape, reminding him he was outside. The steel staircase rattled against the brick wall. Another wall of air descended over the fire escape like an ocean wave, followed by swirls and eddies that howled around him. Successive gusts of wind whipped through the streets, finding their intensity increase among the canyons of the building walls.

Egan pulled up his hoodie to block out the cold, and returned his stare toward Alex. She sat on the couch. He started at her face, her beautiful face. Inhaling to prevent himself from fainting, he looked away, thinking that when he turned to look at her once more, she would not be there.

Some dreams are best left to live in the mind, he thought to himself.

He exhaled. Leaning his neck back, he rotated his head around his shoulders, stretching his neck and hearing tiny clicks, like tumblers loosening on an old fashioned safe. Then, he glanced in her direction once more. Her long, slender neck was like a highway that led down into a valley between her perfect breasts. His eyes tracked down her body and he felt himself start to get aroused as he could see her nipples stand out against the tight tank top that hugged her breasts. They were medium-sized and beautifully formed, perky, curving up from the bottom and pushing out against her fitted shirt.

Then, in a moment, the feeling was gone as he saw

Meghan retrieve something from a nearby duffel bag. His camera.

Alex jumped to her feet. Instantly, her demeanor changed to that of disappointment. Her beautiful green eyes darkened. She pointed at Meghan and the camera.

Looking at her, Egan sensed that she felt betrayed. *Maybe she thinks the camera is hers since she found it*, thought Egan. Meghan listened attentively, nodding her head. Then, she held up a placatory hand, the paintbrush still in it.

Alex sat down on the couch and crossed her arms, shaking her head. Meghan dropped the paintbrush into the glass jar of water and walked toward the kitchen. She returned with a fresh bottle of wine. She filled the glasses and sat on the floor in front of Alex, unconsciously indicating a supplicating gesture of apology by sitting at Alex's feet. They both began to drink once more.

Ba-ham! Ba-ham! Two claps of thunder exploded the in the dark sky. Egan jerked his head upward in the direction of the noise.

Currreeeaawwaahaaackkk! Lightning crackled and flashed, streaking like a horizontal firework across the backdrop of rain-filled clouds, with their glowing, beveled edges.

Egan jumped. To him, it sounded like the fabric of the heavens was being ripped apart and amplified over the entire city.

He shivered as the wind raced around him. For the third time that night, he smelt the odor of salt water, flowers, and concrete. Moisture permeated the air. It began to rain.

Huddled against the wall, he crept closer to the kitchen window. He stared inside. Feeling both captivated and curious, he seemed oblivious to the downpour. He continued watching Alex and Meghan talk. Meghan waved her hand in a big, sweeping gesture, laughing loudly. Alex watched, amused.

Egan watched them longingly, drinking in the scene before him—their merry laughter, their friendship, the warm living room. He wanted to be part of this world. Staring at them, he felt enchanted.

The wind and the rain slapped him mercilessly. So much so, that he did not notice the man watching him from the window across the street.



IN THE tiny apartment on the opposite side of the street from Alex and Meghan's apartment, the old man--the same old man who had scared Jill away the previous week--watched by the window. His living room was crowded with books that he had retrieved from the curb, usually found among the typical giveaways from people moving out. Thousands of books. Although he

had intended to read them, he had only gotten as far as page ten in a book about the care of indoor houseplants.

The books were stacked into every available corner, forcing him to navigate his way around them, reducing the apartment by a hundred square feet. A few dead houseplants sat idly in their pots, in different places around the room. The entire place smelled like decaying grass and rotting paper.

If the books revealed his inability for follow through, the locks on his door, five of them, indicated his paranoia or fondness for privacy or both. Draped from the door were a series of strings and bells, a crude security system that looked like some poorly designed Christmas decorations.

As he squinted through the pouring rain to keep his eyes on his prey, he grinned.

“Gotcha this time,” he sneered under his breath.

He maneuvered his way through the maze of books and into the kitchen, which held his magazine collection. Hundreds of magazines, in stacks on the floor, wobbled precariously as he passed them. He opened a cabinet drawer, fished through the cutlery, and grabbed an Army Navy surplus flashlight. He returned to the fire escape, bumping a stack of magazines on the way out that collapsed across the floor as he left the kitchen. He did not notice.

Returning to the window, he peered through the

pouring rain, at the huddled figure on the fire escape across the street. He opened the window a few inches, just enough to stick the flashlight out. He flicked the flashlight on. The light sputtered on and off. From outside, it looked like signals from a Boy Scout sending messages in Morse Code.

He cursed and banged the flashlight against the windowsill. Slowly, he lifted a shaky hand, twisted with arthritis, to his face and rubbed his eyes. His skin was mottled with a patchwork of liver spots. Prominent blue veins ran along the side of his forehead. He shook the flashlight until the light came on, then aimed it at the figure crouched on the fire escape across the street.



EGAN SAW the flashing light on the wall and window in front of him. *Lightning*, he thought.

As the light continued flashing against the window, Egan turned, put his hands over his eyes, and looked directly at the source—the man holding the flashlight. Immediately, he remembered him. It was the same old man who had shone the light on the girl who was on the fire escape the previous week.

Harmless enough, thought Egan. *He's bored.*

He turned back to the window to watch the girls inside the room. The light flashed a few more times

against the window, then stopped. Alex walked over to the window and peered outside. Egan shrank into the darkness and felt himself aroused, once more, as Alex's nipples pressed against the glass. She remained at the glass for a few seconds, looking in all directions. For Egan, those few seconds felt like an hour. She returned to the living room, plopped on the couch, and resumed her conversation and drinking.

Egan continued watching Alex and Meghan. His lips trembled. The rain had lightened considerably but was still icy cold. He kept thinking about Alex. Despite the cool air and rain, he felt warm inside.

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ACROSS THE street, the old man watched. He clutched his flashlight and banged it repeatedly against the counter. The top snapped off and the heavy D-batteries fell to the ground, rolling underneath the nearest couch. Frustrated, he threw the flashlight across the room. It bounced off a chair leg and spun like a broken roulette wheel.

"Urrggggggg", he mumbled between gritted teeth. He walked into the kitchen, reached in the crevice between the fridge and counter, and retrieved a dusty hunting rifle. The man eyed it quickly, noting that it hadn't been calibrated in years. Returning to the window, still mumbling,

he rested the rifle on the window ledge, the barrel sticking out in the rain.

“As long as I hold it still,” the old man mumbled to himself.

Grabbing a nearby chair cushion, he tossed it on the floor in front of him, then slowly leaned down, placing his knees on it. He leaned in closer to the scope, putting his eye to it. He squinted through the scope and moved the gun slowly until the crosshairs seemed fixed on Egan’s body. He held his breath, then pulled the trigger.

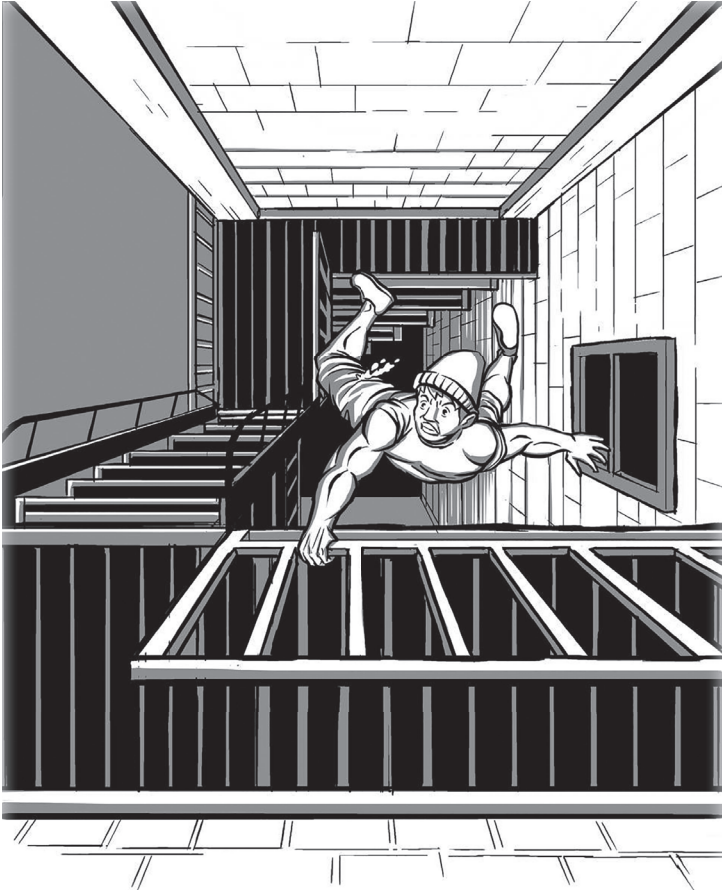
Ba-blaham! Bo-hoom! A clap of thunder erupted simultaneously with the gunshot, absorbing the echo of the gun blast in the maelstrom of the storm. The gun kickback knocked the old man off his knees and tossed him backward. He fell quickly, knocking over a tall stack of books, and hitting his head on table edge before landing on the floor. The final image of the old man—unconscious, a trail of blood seeping from his head, covered in paperback books with pages fluttering from the wind from the open window, his gun at his side—created the impression that it was he who had been shot, and that it was self-inflicted.

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LUCKILY, FOR Egan, the scope of the gun had not been calibrated in a long time and that, coupled with the old man's quivering fingers preventing him from accurate aiming, had saved his life.

The instant that the thunder clap split the heavens, the same instant that the trigger was pulled and the gunfire echo was swallowed by the open mouth of the storm, Egan felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his leg just above the ankle.

The bullet ripped through the lower part of Egan's leg. The force knocked him down. Falling onto his back, he rolled off the fire escape platform, and into the air. Terrified, his hands shot out before him to grab anything at all. His right hand touched steel and he clenched in a vice grip the metal stairs. His other hand grabbed the stairs. He dangled in the air, ten floors up. He glanced downward. One look was all he needed.



I've been shot, he thought. By who? That old guy? Why?

His right leg, just above the ankle, was bleeding from a bullet that tore just beneath his skin, leaving through the other side. The downpour was torrential. The rain was coming down in buckets. With great struggle, Egan

began to pull himself up but stopped as he heard the window being opened.

Creeaaaak, the window creaked as it scraped against the channel. Whippud, it thunked against the jamb. Alex and Meghan stuck their heads out, alerted by the noise, thinking it may have been gunfire.

"Probably just thunder," Meghan said. She closed the window.

Using all of his available strength, Egan pulled himself up onto the platform and collapsed in a heap. That's when the pain set it.

The rain pounded him. The wind howled in blustering swirls. Thunder boomed from the heavens. Lightning cracked and zigzagged across the sky.

Maybe I've committed the worst of sins, by leaving my world and entering the world of above, thought Egan. There's no turning back now. Even if I want to. I've opened a door that's impossible to close.

He leaned against the brick wall and then, breathing heavily, rolled up the leg of his pants to examine the wound. Although he had read about guns and shootings in the news, he had never imagined for a moment that he would be involved in their horror.

He looked at his leg. A hole, in his calf muscle, heavily seeped blood. An entrance wound and an exit wound. He followed the trail of blood as it ran down to his feet, pooling at the lip of his sneakers, then falling downward

toward the street below. He focused his extraordinary vision, following the drops of blood as they fell to the ground like homesick earthworms, landing in a fenced patch of dirt and grass with a tree in the middle.

Suddenly, a dizzying pain, like a jolt of poison, seemed to crawl from his legs into his back, up his neck and into his head. His temples throbbed. He trembled and looked at the sky, shaking away use of his extraordinary senses as he was in a weakened state and did not want to compromise his abilities. He felt dizzy. He wanted to sleep.

Am I dreaming? he thought.

Again, he looked down at the street below. A few taxis zoomed through the wet streets. From his view, they looked like yellow ladybugs splashing over a shiny black surface. Toy-sized pedestrians jogged for cover. Some had umbrellas. Others used newspapers or held their coat jackets over their head. Watching the scene from ten floors up, he felt a wave of nostalgia come over him, followed by a feeling of incredible thirst. He stretched his back against the wall. He yawned. Despite the rain, and the pain, he felt incredibly tired. Succumbing to the exhaustion, he closed his eyes.

Bla-ham! Another thunder clap rang through the sky, sounding like the strike of an enormous kettle drum. Puhucraaakakaakaka! Lightning streaked through the horizon in five brilliant trails, leaving a glowing streak in their wake. One of the lightning trails headed toward

Egan, before connecting with the lighting rod on the roof, a mere twenty-five feet away. As it connected, an enormous crackling sound reverberated all around. This time, it sounded like thick burlap bags quickly ripped in half, but amplified one thousand times louder.

The noise and the lights snapped him to his senses.

“Wake up,” he said to himself. With what little strength he had left, he ripped off a piece of his t-shirt and tied it to his leg to slow the bleeding. In an attempt to shake off the pain, he crouched on one leg, with the limp leg resting. His leg was throbbing and he felt dizzy for the third time.

He looked again into the apartment. He could almost feel the warmth of the room. He was so close. He was twenty-five feet away from the camera and five feet away from the kitchen. But he was worlds apart.

The camera was sitting on a small table by the easel. Alex and Meghan were nowhere to be seen.

He would never make it home in this condition. He had to get inside. He had to get cleaned up. He had to get his wound bandaged. He had to get some water.

He waited. Five minutes later, the living room light turned off. A door closed. He peered into the window. No one was there. As a streak of lightning illuminated the living room, he saw the camera, sitting on the coffee table. He unzipped his backpack and retrieved a homemade knife, that he’d made years earlier. Propping

himself on his good leg, he wiggled it into the slit between the window and the frame below the lock. A minute into it, he could feel it loosen. Then, with a crack, he felt the lock give way. The window rose a half-inch. Quickly, he put his tool away.

He stood, slowly, then leaned against the wall, shifting his weight onto his good leg, and also using his back and the wall to balance himself. Exhaustion riddled his entire body. He took a few deep breaths. His throat was dry and crackled. The blood loss had also caused dehydration. He was desperate for water.

Again, he peeked inside and saw no signs of life. He glanced around him nervously. No one was watching. Not even the guy who had shot him, if it was a guy. He brought his hands to the window frame and lifted, forcefully and gently. Then, with great difficulty, he slid himself through the window onto the kitchen. Immediately, once inside, he took a glass, put it under the faucet, and slowly lifted the handle, filling the cup. He drank it fast. Then poured four more cups, drinking them almost as quickly. He could feel the water moving through his body and he felt like he was taking a shower on the inside.

The house was warm and smelled like perfume and paint. The comforter, sitting in a rumpled pile atop the smaller sofa, looked inviting. Behind the painting that rested on the easel, the camera sat on the table, its strap still attached, dangling from the edge.

Egan walked slowly toward it, stretching his right hand to grab it. In the bedroom adjacent to the living room, Alex had just closed her eyes. The noise from the storm, and the sugar from the alcohol, had left her unable to sleep. She heard a noise. It sounded like lightning or creaking wood.

Lightning? Alex thought. *It sounds like it's coming from the kitchen.*

She strained her ears to catch another sound... then she heard something else. Floorboards creaking. That only meant one thing. Someone was in the living room.

Quietly, Alex lifted her covers and swung her long legs out from the bed, listening again for the sound of footsteps. Carefully, she put her feet to the ground and, nervous about making a noise herself, tiptoed toward her bedroom door.

As Egan approached the table, his now wet clothes stuck to his body and more blood splattered onto the wood flooring, the dark red leaving a trail of spots like dime-sized stepping stones across a pond. Almost holding his breath, he reached out his hand and picked up his beloved camera. He stared at for a moment before he slipped it into his backpack; he'd learned his lesson about using his pocket to hold the camera.

As silently as she could, Alex eased open the door and peeked out through the narrow crack to see a man limping quietly toward the open window. A gust of wind

blew in and added another shiver to the ones Alex felt from her fears. But she sensed something familiar about the dark figure, silhouetted by the lights from the street outside.

Sensing he was being watched, Egan slowly turned around to see Alex staring at him. There were two incongruities about her appearance. One was contrasting her beauty and graceful form, barely covered by a flimsy camisole, with the Sponge Bob Square Pants panties. The second was the baseball bat she held firmly in her hand, her knuckles white as she gripped it tightly.

Both Alex's view and her vision were not as clear as Egan's, and it was only as her eyes got more accustomed to the darkness that she realized why she had found the shape familiar. It was the guy from the subway and the club. As she realized who it was, for a few seconds, they stared at one another and their gaze locked.

Again, Egan felt warmth flood over his entire body. And, for the moments that he stared into her eyes, the pain in his leg seemed nonexistent.

She was beautiful.

Egan stared at her, taking a thousand photographs in his mind. He felt overcome by curiosity and desire. He looked at her, close up, for the second time that week. And, again, he felt the same way he had felt when he saw her before, already in love.

He wanted to tell her. Everything. The words would come forth in a torrent. A Niagara Falls of nouns and verbs and juicy adjectives, a succulent jumble. But he could not.

INTERVENTION

EGAN STEPPED back. Reeceaaaaak! The floorboard creaked once more against the weight of his good leg. The sound shattered their hypnotic staring contest.

Egan suddenly felt the immediacy of the situation. He was an intruder. He was bleeding. He was in love?

Alex snapped out of her reverie. Her hands shook nervously as she held the bat. She bit her bottom lip.

Egan slowly raised his left hand.

Alex lifted the bat. "How did you get in here?"

Immediately, she realized it was a stupid question.

Egan pointed to the window and took a step back. He grimaced in pain and clutched his leg. Alex noticed the blood splatters on the wooden floor, but simply pointed to the window.

"Go," she said.

Egan nodded as he walked toward the window.

The living room lights came on. Under the ceiling

lights, Alex took in the full extent of Egan's condition. He was soaking wet, and his leg was bleeding from a gash above his ankle. The blood on the floor was beginning to pool at Egan's feet. She gasped in horror, almost dropping the bat. Then, she recovered, and stepped closer, opening and closing her hands on the base of the bat.

Meghan's bedroom door was wide open and she stood just outside; one hand on the light switch and one hand on the now almost empty wine bottle. She wobbled slightly as she moved her hand from the switch to rub her eyes. Dressed only in a t-shirt, her large breasts seemed to shudder precariously as she stepped further into the room. It was as if she hadn't even seen Egan as she headed toward the kitchen.

"So thirsty," she slurred.

"Meghan!" said Alex loudly.

Meghan stopped rubbing her eyes. She looked around, then finally noticed Egan in the living room.

"Hey! I've seen you before," she said, openly looking Egan up and down as if he were something to be bought in a shop. She turned to Alex. "He's the cute guy on the subway."

Egan looked at Meghan and gave her a look which was part smile and part wince as another spasm of pain hit his leg.

"I don't care who he is. He broke in," said Alex.

"You know, she's going to be a famous actor one day," said Meghan, pointing at Alex with the wine bottle.

"I know." Egan's voice had such a low rumble, a tone of authority, that Alex took a quick breath. Her face flushed briefly but, quickly, she regained her composure.

"I want you to call 911," said Alex.

"What for? Is there a fire? Oh Lord, there's a fire!" mocked Meghan, repeating the lines from a mashup song she'd watched on YouTube.

"He broke into —"

"Ain't nobody got time for that!" interrupted Meghan. Her eyes had a hazy glow. She raised the wine bottle. Even she herself didn't know what she was talking about.

"... our apartment."

"Ain't nobody got time for that!" Meghan said again, as if doing that would help her understand what she meant.

"What?" said Alex.

Meghan just shrugged and opened the fridge door. As she bent to look inside, her t-shirt was pulled upward, exposing her bare butt. Egan glanced at the sight of the bare flesh. She was voluptuous and curvy, like a pinup model from the fifties. Her skin was olive, a natural tan, as if she was from another country.

He realized he was staring. He quickly looked at Alex and the baseball bat she still held menacingly in her hand. Meghan bent over even further, seemingly oblivious to the display she was creating and put the wine bottle on the floor. She then pulled out two bottles of water from

the back of the fridge. She set them on the counter, closed the fridge, then grabbed them and brought them into the living room.

"You need to leave," said Alex, deciding again that the cops were not needed.

"C'mon. The party's just getting started!" said Meghan as she removed the bottle caps.

"Don't listen to her. She drinks too much. Water." Meghan giggled inanely at her own humor.

Meghan looked at Egan as he took the bottle she proffered. He clutched his leg again with his other hand.

"You're giving him something to drink?" said Alex.

"Come with me. Let's fix your leg," she said, suddenly sounding much less drunk as if the sight of the blood had sobered her up.

Meghan led Egan into the bathroom and directed him to sit in the tub. She looked at him with gentile eyes.

"You've made enough of a mess already."

He slipped off his boots and socks and rolled up his wet pant leg to reveal a bullet wound in his calf. Meghan winced and looked as she might puke at the sight of the two raw wounds. The worst was the side where the bullet had pushed its way out, already slowed down by the flesh and thick muscle it had torn through. Alex followed them to the bathroom, standing by door.

"Do you know who this guy is?" she insisted again. "He broke into our apartment!" Now looking a better

color, Meghan sat on the edge of tub and then looked at Alex. "It's not our apartment. I just pay you eight hundred dollars a month rent so you can feel like it is. It's your apartment."

Alex shook her head briefly as if that would dismiss Meghan's jibe.

"And he's shot. What the fuck? I told you, he's a criminal!"

"We gotta help him or he'll bleed... "

"No he won't. "

"... to death. We fix him up, then we send him on his way..."

"I can't believe this. Why do I let you drink?" Alex was almost shouting now.

"... after I get his phone number," finished Meghan with a grin that made her look more drunk again.

"I'm over this. I'm calling 911 right now."

Alex stormed away from the bathroom and grabbed her phone from the bedroom. She had got as far as pressing 'nine' when Meghan shouted angrily, "If it wasn't for someone helping you, you wouldn't even be here right now!"

Alex put her phone down. She shook her head briefly before grabbing an apple from the fridge and turning on the TV. She stared at the screen sulkily, but her mind seemed elsewhere.

Back in the bathroom, Egan sat quietly, his bleeding

leg in the tub, as Meghan worked on his wounds with a First Aid kit. Blood-soaked cloths lined the tub's edge. A red river flowed into the tub. The faucet was running to keep the blood going down the drain.

Meghan leaned into Egan, pressing a damp washcloth against his leg. As she leaned into him, he could feel the warmth of her breasts as they flattened against his ribcage. He gazed at her cleavage. Underneath her t-shirt, she looked naked. He felt warm in his midsection.

Egan stared at her body. Meghan, in her drunken and tired stupor, was oblivious to Egan's glances, or she did not seem to care. Despite the fact that she was very drunk, she had a gentle touch. She grabbed a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and uncapped it.

She looked directly at Egan. Her eyes were brown with flecks of green in them. Her lips were fat and juicy.

"This is going to hurt."

She dumped the bottle on his wound. It felt as if acid had been thrown on his wound. Egan grabbed the side of the tub and looked away. She continued to dress the wound.

For a few seconds Meghan bent forward in her work. Egan gazed at her again. She was quite naked beneath the t-shirt. Slowly, he moved his hand over his crotch. She looked at his hand. Then, she looked directly into his eyes. Neither said a word, but their eyes were smiling. The moment lasted less than three seconds, but for Egan it felt longer.

He was still looking at her when he noticed that she had broken the gaze minutes earlier. She was nearly finished tying strips of the ripped cloth to prevent further bleeding. Then, she dried his leg and applied a strip of gauze over the bandage, wrapping it with medical tape.

"That should do it," she said as she sat back on her heels, "but you should go to hospital." Egan said nothing. He knew he could never go into one of the human medical places. He would just have to hope his leg healed without getting infected.

"So, who shot you?" asked Meghan.

"I don't know," replied Egan looking down at his leg. The blood continued to seep a little. Then he looked back up at Meghan.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked.

"Because I'm drunk?" said Meghan, shrugging her shoulders. "Lack of better judgment?"

"Is it okay if I have a shower?"

"Sure," she said, standing up. "But I suggest you keep that leg out the way of the water."

"I will," said Egan carefully. "Thank you."

Meghan just nodded and left the bathroom, totally unaware that Egan had used those very common human words for the first time. He actually thought they sounded good and did convey his appreciation of what she had done.

Meghan walked into the living room and noticed Alex now asleep on the couch in front of the TV. Meghan

shuddered and realized the window was still open, so she went to shut it and noticed the broken lock. For a moment she looked shocked as if she had only just accepted what Alex had been saying about the guy breaking in. She closed the window as best she could. As the noise from a few late night cabs receded, she could hear the sound of the shower. Meghan approached the bathroom door. It was open a bit. She pushed it open a little more and peeked inside. With his bandaged leg stuck out of the curtain to keep it dry, she could see Egan showering as he lathered soap over his lean, muscular frame. Unaware that he had seen a lot more of her body than she could see of his, she took a deep breath and continued to watch, curiously fascinated and attracted to this handsome stranger who she just helped.

Egan had been focused on keeping his balance on one leg as he washed himself, but as he stood more easily under the water he sensed that he was being watched. He continued bathing while doing his best to act natural.

Who is watching me, he wondered. Alex or Meghan?

The curiosity, combined with the pain in his leg, was causing him to feel lightheaded. Slowly, he swiveled his head toward the bathroom door. His eyes locked with Meghan's eyes. He gave her a penetrating stare.

Meghan gasped as she looked directly into his eyes. His eyes were enormous. She felt like a planet in his orbit. It was as if she could not look away. Then, his eyes seemed to release her.

Instantly, she felt herself leaving his gravity field. She shuddered. She closed the door and returned to the smaller couch. She felt both embarrassed and curious at the same time.

When Egan emerged from the bathroom, dressed again in his still wet clothes, Meghan was sitting at the kitchen table. He went over to the window and picked up his backpack, quietly checking that the camera was still there. He looked down at Alex asleep and then walked over to Meghan.

"I have to go."

She rolled the water bottle between her hands.

"What's your phone number?"

"I don't have a phone," he said quietly.

"Are you homeless? It's okay if you are. I'd like to see you again."

Egan said nothing and just took a final long look at Alex on the couch. Meghan noticed and looked disappointed.

"Thank you," he said again, enunciating the words slowly in a baritone rumble.

Meghan's eyes brightened as she heard his low voice. It was so low that it made her feel safe. It reminded her of her dad's voice. *All man*, she thought.

Meghan said nothing and only looked at the bottle as he quietly closed the door behind him.

A SECRET REVEALED

NOT REALLY thinking about where he was going, his mind full of too many thoughts, Egan limped along the crowded city streets. Nobody noticed him. In fact, they all seemed to ignore him as they talked with friends, sent text messages, or listened to music.

After walking five blocks, his leg began to hurt. He sat a bench to rest and gather his thoughts.

He sniffed out his route back to the subway station. Then, he smelled something familiar. Other watchers were nearby. He followed the smells toward an alley. A group of watchers were further down in the alley, jumping around. He watched as they shouted and laughed. Something was tossed in the air. Two of the people pushed another to the ground and began to kick him. Then another joined in. They pinned the victim to the ground, taunting and slapping him.

Egan sensed trouble. He focused his superior eyesight

to see a close-up on the situation that was fifty yards away.

It was Togrul. Egan barely recognized him. Togrul's face was bruised, a swollen knot below his left eye. He looked as if he'd lost a fight. His eyes were crazed. His pupils floated around like balls of fire in a pool of milk.

Togrul hurled a woman's purse into the air. It landed in the arms of Ben, one his followers. Three other of Togrul's friends were there too, people that Togrul had recognized from the rally the previous week. Judging from their hysteria, they appeared to drunk, on drugs, or both. Two of the followers kicked a man on the floor.

"Stop kicking him!" the woman screamed. "Stop!"

Egan assumed they were a couple. As she begged and pleaded, Togrul held her back.

He ran as fast as could with his injured leg toward them.

"Hey stop!" shouted Egan in his own language.

All five of the people from his world stopped and immediately stood still as they heard their own tongue. For a moment they looked worried, thinking that one of the elders had caught them in the human's world. Then, they realized who it was.

The four followers, the henchmen, started laughing and moving menacingly toward Egan. Togrul released his grip on the woman. She ran to the man and knelt to the ground beside him, trying to lift him. He was bleeding from the mouth. He got up and they quickly ran away

in the opposite direction. The woman faltered once and looked back, but the man pulled her on and they continued running. They turned the corner and disappeared.

"Well look who it is," said Togrul, as he pulled a bag of white powder from his pocket, stuck a finger into it and sniffed it deeply up his nose. He shook his head a couple of times before he put the bag away again.

"You have to leave," said Egan. "This isn't our world."

Togrul took another deep breath, looked around, then looked at Egan.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I'm... I..." stuttered Egan, suddenly unsure of his situation.

"You sure you don't want to join us in a little human fun do you?" sneered Togrul and the others laughed.

"Tell you what, my friends," said Togrul now grinning. "Since he scared away our human friends," he stressed the last word slowly, "we'll just have to let Egan take their place!"

The others laughed and nodded as they all started to spread out and move toward Egan. He realized what was happening and turned to run back the way he had come, but with his injured leg he was far too slow. They knocked him to the ground and began punching him.

Egan blacked out. Thinking they had killed him, the four followers retreated to Togrul. At this point, Togrul was so high on coke he did not know where he was.

Hoping Togrul would not remember an attack on one of their own, they led him to the entrance of the tunnel and descended to their world below.



THE BLACKNESS gave way to light. Egan opened his eyes. His entire body was in pain. He found himself lying between two dumpsters, in a dark alley. Slowly, he stood. He sniffed the air. Salt water. He followed the smell to the Hudson River. He looked at the bright moon partially obscured by clouds. It was 2:47am. He looked around. He was alone. He jumped into the water.

Later, his clothes still damp, Egan stumbled into his cave. He staggered toward his room.

"Where were you?" asked Armon angrily.

Embarrassed and ashamed, Egan did not turn around. He didn't want his dad to see him in this condition.

Armon stepped closer to his son. "Don't disrespect me by turning your back to me."

Egan raised his arm to hide his face. Armon grabbed Egan's arm and spun him around. Anger turned to shock and concern as Armon took in his son's bruised face, swollen lips, and black eyes.

"Who did this to you?"

"A gang," said Egan quietly, trying to keep his mouth still as he spoke. "I didn't see their faces."

"Are you telling me the truth?" Silence. Armon walked away.

"You've got to learn to stand up for yourself. If you don't, no one else will." The words hung in the air.

"I did stand up for myself," said Egan more strongly. "I saw some people getting attacked and I stood up for them."

Slowly, Armon put his hands on Egan's shoulder. He looked at his bruised face. With gentle eyes that glowed with admiration, resembling a low burning fireplace, Armon gazed into his son's eyes.

Egan's face was a mess. His right eye was partially closed. His bruise was swelling up below his left eye.

"Bruises." Armon's eyes misted over. "You got these for the right reason. You're finally on your way to becoming a man."

"But if I am, why do I feel different?" asked Egan. "Why do other people think I'm different?"

Armon dropped his hands from Egan's shoulders. He looked away. A few seconds later, he stared at Egan. Armon's eyes, that had once appeared gentle and caring, now reflected a pensive nature. He seemed to make up his mind about something. He paced the room, then stopped. "Let's go for a walk."

They walked in silence for a while as Armon clearly marshaled his thoughts. The only time he spoke was to ask Egan about his bad leg. Egan simply replied that it was

a result of the attack. They followed a dimly lit, winding tunnel until they came out into an immense cavern. As Egan looked around, his father went to sit on a bench carved out of the rock. Eventually, Egan joined his father. Neither looked at the other.

“Tell me,” said Egan.

Armon remained quiet for a moment and then with an almost imperceptible nod of his head, he started talking.

“Your mother is not who you think.”

“What do you mean?” Egan looked thoroughly confused and a little angry. “My mother is my mother.”

“You need to listen and I will tell you,” said Armon gently. His father’s voice was so quiet. Egan could not remember if he had ever heard his father speak that way before. Egan simply nodded his head.

“A long time ago, I had a serious injury in the mine. The injury required special treatment. The Elders said it could be fixed here but an old man said I would be better going to a hospital in the human’s world. I managed to get some precious metals that I could exchange for the human’s money to pay the hospital and I went to find some proper help.”

Egan shifted uncomfortably. Noticing his son, Armon stopped talking. A few moments later, he resumed his story.

“I was looked after by doctors who fixed my injuries, but I was cared for by what they call nurses.”

"What's a nurse?" Egan asked.

"They are another kind of medical worker. One of these was a woman of about my own age. We became friends. I had to go back to the hospital about twenty times before my treatment was complete. They helped me learn to walk properly again." Armon paused, clearly deep in reflection. Egan waited a while and then prompted his father.

"So, what happened?"

Armon smiled at a memory.

"We were friends, just friends at first. Then it became more than that."

"What are you saying?" asked Egan, sitting forward and turning directly to look at his father. Armon looked at his son and for a second looked almost shocked as if, through all the cuts and bruises on his son's face, he could suddenly see the face of the woman he had loved.

"She is your mother," said Armon simply.

"No, no," said Egan. "Mom died. Right after I was born. A mining accident."

"That was my wife," said Armon. He began to remember the accident. Tears welled up in his eyes. "Not your mother."

"So my mother ... is the nurse," Egan said carefully.

"Yes."

"She's a human. Fully human?" Egan asked slowly.

"Yes."

“Where is she? Is she, is she still alive?”

Armon looked at his son through his tears and nodded his head. “I think so.”

“Do the elders know?” asked Egan. “Does the clan know?”

Armon shook his head.

For a full minute, the cavern was utterly silent as the full force of the revelation hung in the air.

Egan’s countenance changed. “That’s why I’m so different.” Egan seemed instantly angry. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Armon, caught off guard, was taken aback. “I was waiting for...” he said weakly.

“No wonder I’m different,” cried Egan. “I’m a freak!”

For the second time that night, he ran off as fast as his leg would allow him. Armon shouted after his son, but he did not get up to chase after him.

“No, you’re not, Egan!” then he added, so quietly that Egan would never have heard. “You’re special.”



EGAN SAT on the edge of his bed, his head in his hands. Then, seemingly with great purpose, he picked up his camera that he had gone to such lengths to get back, swung it by its strap, and smashed it into the floor. Cradling the twisted and broken pieces of metal and

plastic gently in his hands, he sat down on the floor and wept. Five minutes later he had just about sobbed all he could when he heard a knock on his door.

"Egan. Let me in," said his dad.

"Leave me alone," said Egan, expecting the usual argument to ensue. Instead, a piece of paper with his father's almost child-like writing on it was slipped under the door. Egan walked toward it and picked it up.

Tess Hallingsworth. Upstate New York.

Egan went to his desk. He rested the paper near his computer.

"Tess Hallingsworth," he said. "Upstate New York." He typed the words into the computer.

The computer, an older model that had been rebooted with scavenged parts, hummed and whirred as the fans cooled the internal parts. His dad had assembled it in running order two years ago. Ramone often tinkered with it to make it run faster.

In his world, the elders forbade access to the human's vast knowledge resources, but some of the more resourceful people had found ways to replicate many of the files and information from the human's internet, which could be accessed on an offline basis through an illegal network. Most people of Egan's age had such an access.

After he typed her last name and hit the "enter" button, the computer buzzed some more. Five seconds later the search engine offered its results: three links to

online newspaper articles. Egan clicked the first one. He leaned toward the screen and read it carefully.

“Who are you?” Egan asked quietly, barely moving his lips. “Why are you in jail?”

According to the article, Tess Hallingsworth had been arrested for trespassing into the area of a nuclear power plant during a protest. Refusing to leave the premises, while waving a “No Nuclear! Pro Solar!” sign, she was arrested. Even though her crime was trespassing and disturbing the peace, she was charged with terrorism and given four years in a state penitentiary.

Egan pulled himself away from the computer. He was dumbstruck by this revelation, first that his mom was human, and second that she was in jail. He glanced at the computer again and continued reading.

So far, she had been in jail for eight months. Her bail had been sat at 50,000 dollars.

He had to get her out of there. He had to get hold of the humans’ money.

Egan looked at the newspaper article that was thumb-tacked to the bulletin board. This one was paper, a copy of the Metro he had picked up in the subway tunnel. Fixed to the wall of his room was the article about Egan’s rescue of Alex. The front page featured a photo, taken by Jill, of the rescue. Inside, running along the story, were numerous additional photos. Although Egan had read the story three times, enough to commit it to memory, he

slowly reread the story once more.

He stopped at the box beneath the story that had been added as an addendum hours before the paper had gone to press: \$25,000 reward offered to person who finds subway superhero, plus a \$50,000 reward for the subway superhero himself.

His eyes lit up. For the second time within two weeks, Egan felt hope in his heart. He knew what he had to do.

THE MISSION

A QUARTER of a mile above Egan's cave room, and three miles south to the south, an abandoned warehouse sat on premium real estate adjacent to the East River. The structure resembled an overturned ship, with its mammoth hull of rusting, corrugated sheet metal rising from the abandoned, garbage-strewn lot, and rows of boarded up windows running along its sides. From the neighboring building's rooftop, the warehouse looked like an enormous tin can that had been cut in half diagonally. In order to keep out squatters, the homeless, passersby, and adventure seekers, a twelve-foot high fence topped with barbed wire and peppered with "No Trespassing" signs ran the perimeter of the overgrown yard.

Over the years, the warehouse had been broken into countless times, until the mob took it over, using it for an assortment of illegal activities—drug and gun transactions, meetings, and interviews as they called them. A

monthly bribe to a cop at the nearby precinct ensured that no patrol cars ever visited the place, despite the sounds that emanated from inside the building or the cars parked in the yard.

Dilapidated and weather beaten, the warehouse appeared forgotten. But this was not the case. Two years earlier, the land on which it sat had been rezoned, from industrial use to mixed use for residential and commercial, immediately making the value of the property worth hundreds-of-millions of dollars. Thus, the land on which it sat was the subject of a court battle with enormous stakes. Whoever won title to, and subsequent possession of, this property stood to make millions of dollars in profits.

As soon as news spread, everyone had their hands in the barrel. A lot of money was at stake. The mobsters who'd been using it for illegal activities wanted their cut. The local police precinct wanted their cut. The city officials of local municipalities wanted their cut. Real estate investors were fighting over it. And to further complicate things, the union mob had their own agenda for it.

It was 2:00 a.m. on a Monday night. Inside of the warehouse, in a tiny room, Togrul sat on a dusty milk crate, waiting again to meet the boss of the mobsters. An industrial outdoor light faced Togrul, forcing him to close his eyes. Even so, the high intensity watt bulbs cast a blanket of heat over him. Beads of sweat formed over

his face, then became trickling rivers from his forehead and neck into his midsection.

Togrul shifted his weight, rubbed his fingers, and rocked in place. His body hungered for the drug. The intense light, blinding white, forced him to keep his eyes closed. Still, his eyes darted nervously from side to side. He sniffed the air, looking like a hunting dog that could not leave his post. Whatever he could not see, he could remember later by the smell.

The door opened and a large, pear shaped man entered. Beside him stood two other men who looked all business. Togrul could sense the seriousness in the air as soon as they arrived. He felt as if the oxygen levels had been reduced fifty percent to accommodate the giants in his presence. It was clear that this time, they were taking no chances with him.

Despite his circumstances and physical condition, Togrul took comfort in the fact that they had pulled out the big guns just for him. It made him feel special. He had climbed a rung higher in the food chain, if only temporarily, than the people in the world above.

It's good to have people intimidated by you, thought Togrul. Otherwise, they take you for granted.

The thought was immediately replaced by Togrul's hunger for the white powder. Because he was a newcomer to the world above, he assumed it was something that only they could give to him.

The pear shaped man moved closer to Togrul. He emanated authority and the aroma of onions and olive oil.

"You were only supposed to call me after you killed him," he said.

Togrul made note of his labored breathing and the smell of food, judging him to be a perfect candidate for a clogged artery or mild heart attack. He could sense that one of his minders wanted to be somewhere else, was thinking about a girl. And the other minder had a chip on his shoulder that was so comfortable, so attached and so permanent, that no body count could displace it.

Togrul nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"I need more white powder," Togrul said, hating his request, hating the desperate tone in his voice, hating himself for his inability to overcome his addiction.

The boss held out his hand and one of his minders put a small vial of cocaine in his palm.

"This'll keep you going. Six hours," he said handing the vial to Togrul who snorted the coke and immediately looked more relaxed. The boss then handed Togrul a piece of paper. This is where we know he will be tonight. We have guys watching him, waiting for him to be dead." The pear shaped man paced the room. "This is your last chance. Now kill him."

As instructed by the men, Togrul waited for them to leave, then unplugged the light and exited the building

through a broken window. The autumn air, coming from the Hudson River, felt cool against his face. It smelled like salt. It was a beautiful night.

Quickly, and with the agility of a street cat, Togrul climbed a nearby building, reaching the rooftop. With an easy leap, he was atop the water tower.

He knew the effect of the white powder would only sustain him until the next morning.

He knew he had to kill someone in order to continue getting the white powder.

But why does this man have to die? thought Togrul. *And where does it end?* He surveyed the city. The city that had promised him freedom had turned him into a slave.

Togrul jumped to the roof, and then sprinted toward the roof's edge. A twenty-five foot distance spanned the gap between this roof and the next. Like a shot, Togrul leaped from the edge.

The guilty thoughts left his mind. He was on a mission.



ONE SUBWAY stop east, and five miles north, another person was on a mission as well: Jill. She stood near the subway entrance, pretending to play with her cell phone. The #6 train arrived and the doors opened. Passengers unloaded, passengers loaded.

“Stand clear of the closing doors,” the metallic sounding voice echoed from the inside of the train. The doors closed. The train lurched, then rumbled up to speed. Popping and clicking and clacking sounds ricocheted off the tunnel walls as the train disappeared on the north-bound track. Once more, it was quiet.

Jill gave another furtive scan of her environment. Then, satisfied that no one was watching, she slipped into the tunnel, climbed the ladder to the floor below, and walked carefully along the rails, in the narrow space between the wall and the left rail. One hundred steps into the tunnel, she switched on her flashlight. Rats scurried as the white-bluish light erupted from the tiny flashlight.

The tunnel magnified the sounds around her. Quiet as she was, Jill’s footsteps echoed. Water dripped from the ceiling. Rats scampered across the puddled water. A gust of wind pushed food wrappers around, from one small mountain of garbage to the next. Popping sounds—the clanking of metals being pulled out of joint—echoed from deeper within the tunnel, as if the subway system itself was stretching her muscles in preparation for a nap, or a fight.

In the last two years of her work as a celebrity photographer, Jill had learned to push aside her fears in order to get the picture. Here though, deep in the subway system, dark and dank, she felt out of her element. Her claustrophobia did not make the situation any better. Despite her fears, however, she was determined to find the guy who

rescued Alex, to get the reward, and to get out of her current living situation.

She stood in place, to gather her thoughts, and summon the reserves of her courage. Footsteps echoed again. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, antennas identifying danger.

Bink! A small stone pelted a rail nearby.

Jill spun around. Her flashlight silhouetted a tall figure that was shining a light in her face. "Who are you?"

The figure turned off his light but put an arm across his eyes to protect them from Jill's light.

Jill recognized him immediately. It was Wallace, the dirty cop who had attempted to rape her. Instantly, she felt repulsed and weak. A mixture of fear and anger swept over her. She felt her stomach forming knots.

"You know who I am!" he barked. "Now get that light outta my face!"

"Leave me alone," said Jill, taking a nervous step backward. "Why are you following me?" Wallace ignored her question.

"You know it's a federal offense to be down here," sneered Wallace walking toward her. "But, I'm willing to make an arrangement, provided we settle our unfinished business."

Jill took another few steps backward.

"I'm leaving," she said, stepping toward him, then stopped.

He did not move. He stood there, putting his arms to his side. Slowly, he extended his thick hand toward hers.

"Take my hand," he said. "I'll walk you out."

"Get the fuck away from me!" she spat.

In the distance the rumbling sound of a train could be heard approaching their station. Wallace turned and walked toward the ladder. Once he reached the edge of the platform he pulled his handcuffs off his belt. As he waited the sound of train grew louder. He knew Jill would have to follow him. Jill looked behind her and at a bend in subway she could see the light of train approaching. She looked ahead of her at Wallace, waiting to arrest her.

"I'm not going to jail!" she shouted to him.

"I'm not taking you to jail. Just for a drive," he laughed.

The subway rails clicked beneath her. A blast of wind blew through the tunnel. That only meant one thing—a train was approaching. At the opposite end of the tunnel, far into the darkness, she saw a train light appear.

"Looks like you don't have a choice," he said.

"I work for myself," Jill said defiantly, not even knowing what she meant by it or what she was going to say next. "I've always got a choice, motherfucker."

A scream erupted, then shouting from the subway platform. Wallace spun around. Jill switched the flashlight to off, and looked in the same direction. On one of the benches further down the subway platform, two people were arguing loudly. The volume escalated.

Wallace climbed up to the platform.

Oblivious to Wallace, one of them stood. Wallace strode toward them.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouted, taking his badge out of his pocket. "Step away from each other and put your hands against the wall!"

Jill watched as Wallace walked toward the people who were fighting. She noticed the outline of his smart-phone bouncing in his cargo pants pocket and knew the pictures were still on them.

Get that phone, she told herself.

The train thundered toward the tunnel in which Jill was standing. Her dilemma—the possibility of being raped by Wallace in his police car, or the possibility of death by train, flashed through her mind. Deciding to stay in the tunnel rather than face Wallace, Jill ran toward the subway wall and pressed her back up against it, flattening her body as much as she could.

She could feel the vibration of the tunnel against her feet. The entire space shook to life, welcoming the oncoming train. Jill surveyed the tunnel. She saw it. Ten feet away, a recessed area in the wall looked big enough to fit her body. She ran toward it, backed into the crevice, and said a prayer. It had been years since she prayed or even stepped into a church. But she knew, deep down inside, that God was real. Too many serendipitous coincidences had proven that fact to her.

As the train lights grew brighter and the roar of the train rose to a near deafening crescendo within the hollow space, Jill felt a tug around her waist and strong hands against her back. The ground disappeared beneath her feet. A strong force had lifted her off her feet. What?

Seconds later, she landed, sitting on a steel pylon, her legs dangling in the air. Twelve feet below, the train raced by in a blur. It was an express train, not even making a stop at this station, traveling some fifty miles an hour.

Frantically, she looked around. Whoever or whatever had brought her up here was gone. She watched as Wallace frisked the two people who had been arguing. Then, in standard procedure, he called in their identification for outstanding warrants. By now, the two people were sitting on the bench, talking quietly to each other, and glancing at Wallace sheepishly. After a minute, Wallace returned their IDs and told them to leave. Hurriedly, they left the station.

Wallace walked toward the subway platform, pulled a flashlight from his belt, and shone it into the tunnel.

"Jill!" he shouted. "You okay?" His tone had a hint of concern.

His shoulder walkie-talkie buzzed, then came to life, spouting out police code for a possible robbery in progress a block away. He gave a quick scan of the tunnel, shut off his flashlight, returned it to his belt loop, then leaned into his walkie while walking toward the subway entrance.

Jill was overwhelmed. She felt as if she was just waking from a dream. She slowly shook her head. She felt weight on the pylon. She felt a warm body beside hers, then, a firm hand on her waist, steadying her position on the steel beam. She knew who it was. She could feel the tears coming. She turned her head and looked into the eyes of Egan.

"Thanks," she said.

He nodded as if he had just opened a door for her.

"How did you do that?" she asked. "That was crazy. That's... impossible." Silence followed.

"You're the guy," she smiled. A tear rolled down her dirty cheek.

"What guy?" Egan said. But he knew.

"The guy who saved Alex. I've been looking for you." Realizing the gravity of the situation, she paused and took some deep breaths.

Egan nodded, listening patiently. Then, Jill, excited at the realization of what this meant, twisted in her position, nearly falling from the pylon. Egan grabbed her tightly to prevent her from falling.

"Sorry, I forgot," she said, between breaths. "There's a reward for you. And for me, too. You'll get fifty-thousand if it's really you who saved her. I'll get twenty-five grand!"

"I know," he simply said.

"I just need to get your fingerprints. And you have to

do it in front of the girl's dad. Let's go meet her dad right now. I'll take you to her house and..."

"Tell them to meet us," interrupted Egan.

"Now? Okay," replied Jill fumbling to get her phone out, but being more careful about her precarious position up on the pylon.

Once she had her phone she sent the same text to Gregory and Alex.



INSIDE A packed, basement level restaurant in the East Village, Gregory, Alex, and Meghan were halfway through their meal. The place, a well-established bistro, was teeming with people. Thankfully, Gregory had known the owners for years and was seated at a cozy corner table near the front window, with the theatre of the street before them. Inside, the place was dark, offering patrons a cats-level view of the world outside the window. For those on the inside looking out, it felt voyeuristic.

Earlier that week, Gregory called Alex to invite her and Meghan for a dinner. For the last year, he had been feeling guilty about his lack of interest in her life. His work had swallowed up all his available time and attention. He felt sick with guilt over her suicide attempt. Her act of desperation served as a wakeup call for him,

one he would never forget. And anything to prevent her from even considering thinking about doing that again was worth any amount of money or time.

Now, they were here, enjoying a delicious meal in a small, well-established restaurant in lower Manhattan. A bottle of wine, a bottle of Artesian spring water, fresh jumbo olives, a tub of fresh butter, and a basket of steaming hot garlic bread sat in the center of their table. Wine glasses, half full, water glasses, and delicious looking meals set before them. Alex stabbed forkfuls of penne pasta with a la vodka sauce and grilled chicken, topped with fresh parmesan cheese. Meghan worked on a thin crust pizza, littered with fresh mushrooms, heirloom tomatoes, artichoke and ricotta cheese. Gregory enjoyed crab cake sliders and angel hair pasta primavera with shrimp.

The dinner served to cap off the last few weeks of events which had begun as tragic, became tumultuous, then concluded positively for all of them. The residuals, from Egan's rescue and subsequent loss of his camera, had proven to be fairy dust. For all three of them, this event had set things into motion and everything had taken a turn for the better in beautiful and unexpected ways.

Between bites of the garlic bread, with its deliciously chewy inside and delightfully crunchy crust, Alex explained her good fortune from the previous week. Two callbacks in three days. A follow-up interview with a manager, the same manager who had signed a recent

unknown, who now had a minor role for a recurring character in an ABC pilot TV show. An audition for a supporting character in an independent film that Warner Brother's had a first-look deal with. Her attempt to end her life had opened doors for a new life.

Meghan, less drunk than her roommate, listened with enthusiasm. At one point, as Alex rambled on, letting the wine multiply the words in her story to the point of additional pages and hyperbole, Meghan was tempted to point out that any attention that Alex was receiving was due, in a good part, to sympathy more than anything else.

Sensing that Meghan was about verbalize this sentiment, Alex nudged her politely with his foot under the table, then looked at her and nodded his head. She understood and kept mum.

Regardless of the reasons for her popularity, the outcome was very real. Alex was receiving positive reviews from her callbacks. The positive reviews of her auditions, among the tight knit network of talent agents and casting directors, were creating a buzz for the young actress. Even bloggers had mentioned her name more than once and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were making the hype wave even bigger in size. Alex was on the rise.

The event had also affected Meghan in positive ways. Thanks to Egan's photographs, her gallery opening had been a huge success. Even galleries as far away as London

were requesting an exhibit of her work. The popularity of Egan's photographs had lit the fuse, and set into motion the popularity of her artwork. As a result, Meghan was a rising star in the art world.

Since Alex was riding the crest of a wave that began with a rash decision, Gregory had decided to follow suit and follow a decision just as rash.

A day earlier, fueled by caffeine and alcohol, a large cup of coffee with a long pour of Bailey's and feeling tired of sitting on the logical side of the fence, inspired by one of his favorite songs from the 1990s band, "Ned's Automatic Dustbin," he decided to tough it out with the mob guys. Alone in his thoughts and high on sugar and alcohol, surrounded by music and the chatter of college students that pervaded the Union Square coffeehouse in which he sat, he hurriedly signed the paperwork for the lease on the factory that he planned, along with his real estate partners, to turn into artist's lofts.

Meghan put her fork down and pulled a well-thumbed newspaper cutting from her purse. She straightened it out and read, "... the entire exhibition was phenomenal and abundant with kinetic energy, combining the familiarity of the past with the restlessness of the future."

Meghan put the cutting back in her purse and grinned at Alex and Gregory. Alex was just thinking that Meghan could probably have recited the story by heart by now but didn't mention it. All she said was, "You deserve it."

Gregory nodded as he finished chewing, and then turned to his daughter. "And how did the audition go? The one that's going get you to Broadway and Hollywood."

Alex looked down. "Well, not that good..."

"Hey, I know you really wanted that one but there are loads that you know you are a shoo-in for," encouraged Meghan.

Gregory nodded.

"Meghan's right, Alex."

Alex looked up and then her face lit up into the broadest of grins. "Actually it went great and I got it!"

Gregory and Meghan whooped and hollered so loud that they caused all the other diners in the place to turn around and stare.

"Hey! That's my girl," said Gregory raising his wine glass and toasting Alex as Meghan gave her a hug.

"And now it's my turn," said Gregory, getting the two girl's attention. "Guess who got the contract for the factory space on the East River?"

"You got it?" shrieked Alex, attracting more stares.

"Really?" said Meghan, looking like a ten-year-old who'd just been promised her first pony.

"Yep and you guys are gonna be getting your own loft space. I put it in the clause."

Meghan and Alex both stood up and hugged each other again, jumping up and down. As they did so, Gregory's phone buzzed and by her place at the table. So did Alex's.

Alex broke away from Meghan and picked up her phone. Gregory and Alex looked at each other, their eyes wide.

“What?” asked Meghan.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

LOOKING DOWN on the three diners from the roof of the building opposite was Togrul. From his perch at the corner of the roof, he could see them at their small square table near the window.

Using his superhuman vision, Togrul watched Gregory, Alex, and Meghan. Using his superhuman hearing, Togrul zeroed in on their conversation. But it was lost, indistinguishable among the noise from the crowded restaurant and the street below that was teeming with pedestrians and cabs.

To make up for the fact that he could not hear what they were saying, Togrul observed them carefully, analyzing their gestures and body movements. Judging from their appearances, they looked like they would be there for a while. As he continued to watch them from his perch, Togrul felt a momentary hint of jealousy, even empathy, at their familial relationship. Then, in an instant, his body recoiled in a brief spasm, reminding him that this was a glimpse of what was to come—the feeling of being drug sick, and he was reminded of his original mission. Togrul continued to watch.

Suddenly, the lighthearted atmosphere of the trio at the table had changed. Gregory waved over a waiter, quickly gave him his credit card then discussed something excitedly with Alex and Meghan. Alex polished off her fourth glass of wine. Meghan was digging into her tiramisu, nodding her head while Alex and Gregory continued talking. As soon as the waiter returned, Gregory signed and returned the receipt, then stood to leave. Alex stood, slightly wobbly on her feet. Gregory noticed and grabbed her shoulder to steady her. He quickly poured her a glass of water and gave it to her, encouraging her to drink. In one big swig, she downed the entire glass. Meghan stuffed the last bit of dessert into her mouth, washed it down with a half full glass of water then stood too. The trio exited the restaurant.

Togrul watched, wide-eyed and curious as to what had happened to cause them to leave so fast. He stood up to see what they would do next.

Gregory whistled shrilly for a cab and the three of them quickly got in. The cab sped away. Taking a few seconds to check his route, Togrul started to follow the yellow car, leaping from roof to roof. He saw the taxi stop at the entrance to a subway station and jumped down into an alley between two buildings before he hurried into the station.

Gregory exited the cab and walked briskly toward the subway entrance. He had an arm affectionately around

his daughter, Alex, to protect her and steady her as she walked. His other hand reached for Meghan, but she was already jogging ahead of them. They entered the mouth of the subway.

Togrul kept close behind but out of view. He waited until they disappeared into the subway.

SUBWAY SHOWDOWN

THE GAPING mouth of the subway, emanating yellow light, swallowed Gregory, Alex, and Meghan as they descended the steps. Togrul, with the agile and pronounced movements of a cat hunting a mouse, crept down the stairs. Once the trio were beyond the gate, Togrul swung it closed, bending a bar in place to prevent it from being opened by anyone else.

The subway appeared empty and was mysteriously quiet.

Togrul followed the group as they walked onto the subway platform. As soon as no one was looking, he leaped to a steel pylon high above the platform that offered him a rat's eye view of them. Then, as they walked and talked, he crept from one pylon to another, sometimes making jumps, always landing softly on his feet. Quietly, he watched them, waiting for the right moment.

"He's here?" Meghan asked for the third time. "Are

you sure?"

"How many times you gonna ask?" said Alex.

"That's what she said," said Gregory, with a tremble in his voice. "She's with him. Somewhere in the tunnel."

Their voices echoed off the tiled walls.

Gregory looked around and, feeling it was like manna from heaven, noticed Wallace at the opposite end. He called to the detective but presumed he wasn't heard.

The cop stood at the opposite end of the platform, staring at the people as they left the train. Navigating his way through the crowd, Gregory walked over to the cop. Wallace noticed Gregory, and looked at him with a bored expression.

"Hi Detective. We're meeting someone and we're not sure if it's safe. Could you come with us? It'll only be a minute."

"Do I look like a rental cop?" sneered Wallace as he put his badge away, he was more interested in Jill than playing the Good Samaritan.

Gregory pulled out his wallet and slipped Wallace two one hundred dollar bills. Wallace pocketed the money in a flash and smiled to Gregory.

"Happy to help you, Sir!" he said with a grin that exposed his bad teeth.

Alex whispered to Meghan, "Where is she?"

Meghan looked around and shrugged. She would have preferred to stay in the restaurant and get drunk at

Gregory's expense. She had planned to convince Gregory to order a second bottle of wine, and she knew he would have as Alex had destroyed the first bottle.

"It's that photographer, right?" checked Gregory.

"Yeah, Jill," said Alex.

Alex looked around the empty platform. She sensed something was wrong, but could not determine exactly what it was. In her anxiety to meet the guy who saved her, she hadn't noticed that no one else had come down the stairs.

Alex looked at Meghan. "Maybe the cop spooked her."

Gregory shot her a look. "If she has nothing to hide, she has nothing to be afraid of."

Wallace was now listening carefully the conversation and, as slow as he was, had been putting two and two together.

"Something to do with a photographer, is it?" he asked innocently.

Caught by surprise by the question, Gregory simply nodded. At this statement, Alex and Meghan looked at each other, clearly puzzled and now very curious.

"Follow me," said Wallace.

Wallace led them to edge of subway platform. He stopped by the ladder that led down into the subway tunnel.

"In here?" whispered Gregory to Wallace. "Tell her to come out."

"Come out!" shouted Wallace. "Your friends are here."

Silence followed. They waited. Wallace switched on his cop flashlight. The powerful bright light cut into the darkness, revealing the squalor and filth. In its path, thousands of dust specks swirled. Shallow pools of filthy water. Rats retreated from piles of garbage to holes that led to their living spaces behind the subway walls.

Gregory looked around nervously. He began fidgeting with his hands.

"This is bullshit," said Gregory. "Let's go."

Suddenly, ahead of them, two figures dropped in front of the circular glow of light. One held the other then stepped away after they landed.

All four of them were startled. Gregory gasped, bringing his hands to his mouth. Meghan hugged Alex. Wallace trembled.

Everyone stared, silently, at the two figures, standing some twenty-five yards away in the glow of Wallace's flashlight.

Recovering quickly, Wallace pulled out his gun.

"Alright guys," Wallace said in a bored tone. "Put your hands out where I can see them and approach the platform. Before a train runs you over."

Gregory put his hand up. "What are you doing?"

"You can't arrest her," said Alex. "She hasn't done anything."

Meghan, less drunk than Alex, accessed the situation. She looked at Alex and Gregory, then at Wallace.

Meghan turned to Wallace. "Maybe you should turn off your flashlight. Put your gun away. You're scaring them."

Wallace glared at her, then returned his attention to the two suspects in the white glow of his flashlight. They were gone.

Egan and Jill stood in a vertical crevice space of the subway wall, a recessed area that was inches beyond the reach of Wallace's flashlight. Jill looked at Egan and smiled. For the first time in a few days, she felt in control of her life, that she had power, that she had options. Egan sniffed the air, and sensed danger. Quickly, he determined that it was the danger of the current situation and nothing more.

Clearly embarrassed and angered, Wallace waved his flashlight around. "You think you can hide from me?"

The whitish-bluish glowing circle moved from one side of the tunnel to the other, revealing dust and trash and scattering rats. Egan and Jill were nowhere to be seen.

Some twenty-five yards behind the group of Alex, Meghan, Gregory, and Wallace, Togrul dropped to the platform, landing silently. He crouched behind a bench that sat against the wall, curling his body into a small ball, so as not be seen if any of them turned around. He held a long knife in his hand. A short blast of wind,

coming from the tunnel ahead, rushed past him, carrying a familiar aroma.

A watcher, Togrul thought to himself. *Must be an old scent.*

Wallace put his gun back into his holster. He put his hand over his eyes for a better look, while continuing to sweep the tunnel with his flashlight.

“You have ten seconds to come out, or—”

“Go fuck yourself!” Jill shouted. Her voice ricocheted off the subway walls, echoing ‘fuck yourself.’ The words banged around the subway walls, clanging like the sounds of a holiday bell ringer soliciting donations.

Meghan burst out laughing.

“See the shit I put up with?” asked Wallace, to no one in particular. “Trespassing. Resisting arrest. Threatening a police officer.”

“Maybe you should call for back up,” suggested Gregory. Wallace glared at him.

Like a flash, Togrul shot from his position to a nearby steel column. Slowly, he stood, then peeked at the group. Their backs were turned. He crept to another column, then another, advancing by twenty feet each time. His target was getting closer.

Unused to all this interplay between the humans, Egan kept quiet. Then, he sensed danger again, and the smell of another watcher. He looked beyond the group and saw Togrul approaching them quickly with something in

his hand. Egan darted from the crevice and stood in the circular glow from the flashlight.

“Look out!” he shouted and pointed to Togrul. Everyone turned around except for Wallace.

“Really?” sneered Wallace, as if he’d fall for that one.

Togrul now pushed the knife further out in front of him and with a cocaine-fueled madness in his eyes, ran toward Gregory. Alex turned, saw Togrul approaching with the knife and screamed. Then, Gregory and Meghan turned around. By the time Wallace had turned around, Togrul was already in the air, and landed softly onto a pylon high above them.

Wallace looked around the empty subway platform. He shook his head in fury and glared at Gregory, Alex, and Meghan.

“Really?” Wallace sneered.

He put the gun back, lowered his head, and brought up a hand to rub his eyes.

“There!” Gregory shouted, pointing to the pylon above them where Togrul was perched. Wallace shot Gregory a dirty look as Togrul descended onto him.

Togrul landed on the upper half of Wallace’s body, the force and weight caused Wallace to buckle at the knees and collapse against the cement platform. Wallace struggled to get his gun, but was no match for Togrul, who pulled it out from his holster and flung it. The gun slid to a nearby bench landing underneath in the corner.

Togrul and Wallace wrestled on the subway floor, two rolling bodies with arms and legs swinging wildly.

The walkie-talkie, on Wallace's shoulder, spit out requests for information.

Annoyed by the sound, Togrul ripped it from its Velcro attachment, snapping the cord, and tossing it into the blackness of the subway tunnel.

Wallace, overweight and slow, was no match for Togrul, who had fought his way up the food chain among fellow mine workers. Wallace was losing the fight. Less than a minute had passed, and his face was swollen and he was bleeding from the mouth. Despite his heavy frame, Wallace had strong legs, which he used to kick Togrul away. Frantic, he slid away from Togrul, gasping for breath, with one hand in the air indicating surrender. Togrul raced toward him, grabbed his hand, and dragged him toward the subway platform, tossing him over the edge. Wallace, already half-conscious, hit the rail with a thud, instantly knocking him unconscious.

Horried and fascinated, Alex, Gregory, and Meghan watched the fight in silence. Togrul withdrew his knife and raced toward Gregory. Seeing this, Gregory began running in the other direction. A shadow of someone above them grew bigger in size, as Egan launched himself from a nearby pylon and descended onto Togrul.

Egan tackled Togrul to the ground. Togrul opened his hand to brace his fall and the sharp knife fell to the ground.

Repeatedly, Togrul punched Egan in the head and neck. Unable to breath, Egan retreated, grabbing his neck and gasping for air. Egan leaned his back against the subway wall, putting his hand in the air to show surrender.

Quickly, Togrul looked at him and remembered the laws of the clan of watchers. The act of murder, within the clan, by one member to another member, meant automatic banishment from the clan. His mission was not Egan. His mission was Gregory.

By now, Gregory was running toward the far end of the subway tunnel, a dead end. Terrified, Gregory tried to open a series of doors against the subway wall. They were for transit authority workers or electrical workers and they were locked. Gregory looked back at the fight location.

Togrul looked at Gregory, who was fifty yards away, and zoomed in to see the fear in his eyes. In less than three seconds, Togrul covered the fifty-yard distance. In a crazed and furious blur, Togrul punched Gregory until he was unconscious, then began dragging him toward the subway platform. Togrul held him in an iron-like grip, dragging him toward the third rail to electrocute him. Gregory opened his eyes and began flailing his arms toward Togrul.

Egan stumbled toward them, with Meghan, Alex, and Jill beside him. Togrul now grabbed Gregory by the throat.

“No!” shouted Egan, running toward Togrul.

“Stop!” screamed Alex.

Just as Egan was about to rush toward Togrul again, Wallace turned his flashlight on Togrul and shone it straight into his eyes. A gun blast, then another, then another echoed through the subway. But Togrul had already disappeared from the flashlight beam. The bullets zipped past, sparking off the steel columns nearby.

Togrul rushed at Wallace in a blur and snapped a hand around the wrist that held the gun. The two wrestled over it and gun was fired, the sound echoing down the tunnel. Wallace had been shot and crumpled to the ground. Togrul grabbed the gun and ran toward Gregory, firing repeatedly, until the bullets were gone. One of the bullets found its mark, hitting Gregory in the leg.

“Ahhhhh!” Gregory cried out in pain, clutching his leg. Togrul descended onto Gregory.

Yet again, Egan flew through the air and began pounding on Togrul to try to get him to release Gregory. Togrul threw Egan off him and down onto the rails where he slammed his still injured leg onto the solid steel. Egan howled in pain.

Cla-click. Po-clang. Cle-ack. The sounds of steel pieces snapped together only meant one thing. A train was approaching. Eeeerrrrrrnnnnnnntttttt. The rumble of the train grew louder.

With a train now approaching the station, Wallace,

who was shot in the thigh, managed to stand and he aimed his gun over the edge of the platform at Togrul.

“Let him go!” he screamed again.

This time Togrul was smarter and, still moving incredibly quickly, he raced toward Wallace, but held a now almost unconscious Gregory in front of him. Egan was struggling to get to his feet but blood was pouring down his leg. He glanced over at Alex, Meghan, and Jill who were watching, scared, helpless. He dragged himself toward the platform as the train approached.

Still holding Gregory in front of him so that Wallace could not shoot, he got up close to the cop and then sent out a rapid, heavy boot to Wallace’s head and Wallace flew backward to land in a puddle near the third rail. His body twitched as the electrical currents took hold of him. Egan pulled Wallace from the puddle and laid his limp body underneath the platform adjacent to the rails.

Togrul lifted Gregory and held his head out over the edge of the platform where it would be smashed by the incoming train. Gregory, battered and bleeding, looked up at Togrul.

“Why?” croaked Gregory.

“Because of the white powder,” said Togrul.

“What?”

“Cocaine,” said Togrul, using the drug’s proper name for the first time. And that single word saved Gregory’s life.

"I can get you that, as much as you need," said Gregory. "I know people."

Togrul seemed to falter in his actions and for a few seconds he was unsure what to do. The next thing he knew was when Egan smashed down a piece of old metal pipe he had found on Togrul's head. Stunned and shaking his head, Togrul dropped Gregory who managed to roll away from the platform edge. The train was now approaching fast, its lights picking out Togrul and Egan as they fought madly on the platform; the blow to the head had weakened Togrul and, despite his leg, Egan was now holding his own. The ongoing shouts and screams of the three girls were suddenly drowned by the blaring of the train's horn. The girls were now helping Gregory and had him leaned against the platform wall. He was bleeding heavily and in shock.

As he was braking the train for the station stop, Bernard saw Togrul and Egan fighting and Gregory, staggering to safety.

"Oh not again," he said to himself as he urged the train to stop.

With the brakes locked and screeching, the train finally shuddered to a halt and the few passengers began to leave the train, only to find the subway exit jammed closed by Togrul's twisted bar. Some shouted protests up the stairs and a transit authority guy shouted back that they know about the gate and people would have to

wait. Like fishes that have reached the end of the tank, the disgruntled passengers turned back the way they had come. Some headed back onto the train and others stayed on the platform. Again like fish, they all stared at the blur that was Egan and Togrul fighting near the end of the platform. Alex, Meghan, and Jill, deciding that they couldn't help Egan and knowing that they needed to get Gregory to hospital, lifted him up off the platform. Bruised, battered, and bleeding profusely from the knife wounds, Gregory staggered into the front car of the train.

It was at the same time that Togrul and Egan moved in the same direction, but rolling together like a pair of demented Siamese twins, they disappeared onto the rails in front of the train. Distracted by what he saw as the crazy people around, Bernard never saw the two combatants dropping off the platform, he was staring at the crowd of train passengers, many now videoing the spectacle on their phones.

They surged forward to the platform edge and Togrul, having just thrown off Egan yet again and beyond the waiting train, saw the crowd staring and, in anger, picked up Wallace's body and threw it past Bernard's windows and into the gaping spectators. Screams filled the air as the people scattered, Wallace's weight knocking some of them to the ground and splattering them with the still wet blood from his wounds. Eventually, the body skidded to a bloody halt like a carcass tossed across an abattoir.

Some people continued to run away down the opposite end of the platform, others, quite unbelievably, began to video the body as if it might suddenly start moving.

RUNAWAY TRAIN

ON THE train, the sight of three young girls caring for a badly injured man was an incongruous sight for their fellow subway riders and they were met with curious and fearful stares.

“We’ll get you to a hospital at the next stop,” said Alex quietly to her father as she held his hand.

Gregory simply nodded his thanks as Jill glared at the people around and they averted their gazes. Meghan, who had been doing the most crying and screaming as the all fighting ensued, was now quiet and clearly in need of some medical attention herself to deal with the shock. But, unfortunately for her, there was still much more to drama to unfold. In his cab, Bernard was told on his radio to get the train out of the station and with a jolt, it recommenced its journey.

Suddenly, the door between the two cars banged back and everyone turned to the noise. There stood Egan, his

face a mass of cuts and quickly swelling bruises and torn clothing. The leg of his pants where he had been shot before was again soaked with blood. He slammed the door behind him, heading over to Alex and the others.

"You have to get off the train!" he said to them, his voice croaking with exertion.

"We know," said Alex, "We're taking him to the hospital. You need to ..."

"I don't mean for that reason," interrupted Egan, glancing over his shoulder, "I mean it's still dangerous because..."

Egan's words were drowned by the same banging of the door and they all spun around. Togrul stood there looking almost worse than Egan. He stared at them all in the train car and then down to his feet. Then with a manic grin, he bent down to disconnect the front car from the ones behind and soon they were disappearing as they lost speed. Some passengers could be seen frantically banging on the windows.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the noise of a robotic sounding announcement over the subway intercom. "This is a message from the MTA. Due to an incident at the Chambers Street station, the number six train will be delayed until further notice. Please exit the train at the next station and find an alternative route. Thank you for your patience. Remember to stay safe, keep your personal belongings on you at all times, and be aware of your surroundings."

Just for one second Jill almost laughed at the fact that passengers in the now stranded cars behind them would find it rather difficult to get off at the next station.

Then she realized that Togrul had now launched himself after Gregory and, once more, Egan was trying to come to the rescue. With the train now traveling fast, neither of the fighters could easily stand and as Togrul threw Egan across the train, he crashed into Gregory, knocking him unconscious. Jill dashed up the front of the train and banged on the conductor's door.

Inside his cab, Bernard had already unzipped his duffel bag, revealing his purchase from the pawn shop earlier that week. A 9mm snub nose revolver and a sawed off shotgun. This time, he was ready. He grabbed the 9mm snub nose and slipped it in his belt. Then, he grabbed the shotgun and exited the cab, just in time to see Togrul about to drive his knife into Egan.

Moving very quickly for his bulk and thinking that he knew he would need them one day, Bernard lifted the shotgun towards Togrul and fired, just as the train dipped abruptly, throwing the barrel of the gun upward. The pellets peppered the roof of the car, shattering a few lights, some hitting Togrul in the shoulders. The other passengers, already cowering from the fight, screamed and cried out.

Bernard swapped the pistol into his right hand but he was too slow. Togrul leaped on him the gun slid away down the subway aisle.

Togrul and Egan struggled to grab the gun at the same time. The gun fired into the ceiling creating sparks until all the lights went out. Amidst even more screams, the intermittent lights from the subway were the only thing to illuminate the murderous mayhem that still ensued.

Togrul jumped on him with such force that Bernard dropped the 9mm gun. It slid down the aisle. Bernard had hit his head when tackled by Togrul and blood poured down his face. As Jill tried to wipe it away and stem the flow with her sweatshirt, she looked up and saw another train heading straight at them.

"There's another train! What can I do?" she yelled at Bernard.

He shook his head briefly as if trying to clear it, and then understood. He managed to get half to his feet and pointed, "Throw that lever, the one on the far right!"

Jill ran into the conductor's compartment, looked at the control panel, and pulled the lever on the right side.

Just as it looked as if the two trains would crash, the single car seemed was thrown to safety onto an open line. By this time, the fight between Togrul and Egan resembled a staged wrestling match. Both, still with hands on the shotgun, rolled toward the back of the car and as it switched lines, they were thrown out through the open door and out onto the rails. The rogue subway car continued to hurtle down the abandoned rail track until Bernard managed to stagger back to his feet and

pull the emergency brake. The subway train eventually slowed to a stop and Bernard weaved drunkenly back out with a first aid kit in his hands. He went and sat down next to a now-conscious-again Gregory.

“Am I gonna live?” asked Gregory.

“Yeah,” replied Bernard, handing the kit to Alex. Then, he looked up. “Where’d they go?”

Alex and Meghan looked at him. Alex pointed to the open door at the back of the train car. On the path between the two sets of rails, Egan and Togrul still battled for the shotgun. But Togrul had landed on the ground first when they fell and he was badly wounded. Egan sensed a weakening in Togrul’s grip and, finding some inner reserve of strength, managed to wrest the gun from Togrul’s grip. He swung it by the barrel and smashed the stock into Togrul’s head causing him to fall back onto the rails unable to move.

Cla-click. Po-clang. Cle-ack. The sounds of steel pieces snapping again. Another train was approaching.

Egan looked down at Togrul and then up toward the train light that appeared the size of a dime in the distance.

“Help me,” groaned Togrul. “Help me.”

Egan put his hands to his knees. He breathed heavily, absorbing any available oxygen to ameliorate the pain in his body. He took another breath, assessing the situation. He looked at the light of the oncoming train, then at Togrul.

Togrul grabbed Egan's leg. "Help me. If I die, they won't let you live. You know the rules of the clan."

Egan realized that, in his lifetime, no murder had ever been committed in the watcher's community. To end another's life, according to the laws of the clan, meant banishment forever from the clan.

Egan understood the gravity of the situation. The sound of the train roared through the tunnel. The rails shook. Both Egan and Togrul were bathed in the bright white glow of the train light. The train horn blared loudly, its sound echoing through the enclosed space.

Egan seemed to take a few seconds over making his decision and then bent down and pulled Togrul to safety just in time, as the train roared by them.

"Why? Why were you trying to kill that man with Alex?" asked Egan as he sat down next to the still prone Togrul.

"The white powder," grunted Togrul.

"White powder?" asked Egan.

"They call it coke. They said I had to kill him, if I wanted more of it."

Egan shook his head. "Bad habit."

"Why were you protecting him?" asked Togrul.

"Because I care about her," said Egan.

"Bad habit," said Togrul. "It's not your world."

Egan shook his head. "It's not yours, either." With effort, Egan stood up, then started to walk away.

“It’s good to see you finally stand up for yourself,” said Togrul. But Egan just kept on walking.

Togrul winced in pain as he tried to stand then he collapsed again in an exhausted heap. Eventually, he crawled over into a dark space and fell asleep.

AFTERMATH

GREGORY OPENED his eyes. He felt dizzy.

Where am I, he thought?

He jerked his head quickly to look at the door, and felt a searing heat rip through his neck and set his temples ablaze. Beside him, stood a table with a pitcher of water and small stack of paper cups. He poured himself a cup and drank it in one gulp.

The number on the door read 15c. Then, he remembered.

I'm in the hospital, he remembered. I've been badly injured.

The pain of throbbing tremors in his upper legs was almost unbearable, as if a volcano would erupt just below the skin. He looked down at his body. His legs were bruised and swollen. His right leg, where he had been stabbed, was wrapped tightly in bandages but the blood, now dry, had managed to seep through.

Turning his head, ever so slowly, he looked out the window. A nighttime view of Harlem. From the fifteenth floor, the city was quiet. He focused his eyes to gaze at his reflection, and trembled when he saw the image looking back at him. He didn't recognize himself. A face, puffy and swollen, purple and blue, stared back at him. A gauze bandage above his ear and another taped above his right eyes.

He refilled the cup, and drank it. Then another, and another. Ever so carefully, he rested his head against the pillow and closed his eyes.

A few hours later, he awoke. Feeling rested, but still feeling sore, he contemplated his situation.

He thought he could outsmart the mob. By buying the factory under a Limited Liability Corporation and creating a legal hurdle for them to cross, he hoped to tire them to the point where they quit pursuing ownership. Instead, they got angry and put a price on his head.

I'm lucky to be alive, Gregory thought.

The thoughts of the mob and real estate transaction clouded his mind. Then, like a cloud in passing, the thoughts dissipated and other thoughts rushed in to fill the space.

Suddenly, like water erupting from an open fire hydrant, the memories flooded his mind of Alex, Meghan, the cop, and himself on the subway platform. Then, the attack that came out of nowhere by the pale guy. A pale

guy, similar-looking to the attacker, defending him from the attacker. And Jill, the photographer he'd met earlier in the week, with the pale guy. The attacker getting the upper hand. Getting stabbed. The pale attacker tossing the cop onto the tracks. Them rushing into the subway car. More attacks in the car. The subway car released, then disappearing in the tunnel. The subway conductor with a gun. The gun blast. Pain. Noise. Shouting. Then, unconsciousness.

Why did that guy attack me? he wondered. And the guy who saved me looked so similar. Are they brothers? Why are they so pale? How are they so strong? Why was the smaller of the two so willing to protect me and Alex against the other guy? Why would he do that? Why? Who is he? Did the cop die?

He looked up to the ceiling. "Thank you, God." He felt very grateful indeed to have come out of it alive.

The guy who had attacked them had just seemed unreal. But the other strange guy, had now saved his life, too. He felt thankful and indebted. He remembered how Alex had explained to him, just before he had fallen unconscious, that he was the same guy who had rescued her.

He the guy who rescued Alex, remembered Gregory. In a strange way, it made sense.

The door opened. A nurse entered the room. She looked too young to be a nurse.

She looked up from her clipboard. "How are you feeling?"

“Ready for a night out on the town,” Gregory smiled. “My helicopter should be landing on the roof any minute from now.”

She looked at the machine that was nearby, then jotted something on her clipboard.

“I heard it land a few minutes ago,” she said, not missing a beat. “But it left.”

Gregory chuckled. “Can I ask you something? How long have I been here?”

“Forty years,” she said dryly, continuing Gregory’s joking banter. “Your bill is gonna be huge. You paid my college tuition.” She gave him a wink. “Thanks.”

Gregory laughed. “You’re a live one. Seriously, though. How long have I been here?”

“You’ve been here twenty-four hours,” she said. “You arrived last night.”

She pulled a bottle from her scrubs pocket and placed it on the table nearby. “Here. I want you to take one of these every six hours, starting now. If you have any reaction, which you shouldn’t because we checked your records, pick up the phone and dial zero. Or, if it’s a medical emergency, you can press this button.” She pointed to a button in the wall beside the bed. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

“I could use some more water. Thank you.”

“Sure.” She gave a quick nod, then turned and left the room.

Gregory laid his head against the pillow and closed his eyes. He would leave the questions for later. For the time being, he just wanted to rest. He fell fast asleep.

A familiar hand touched his shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw Alex staring at him, a look of concern in her eyes.

"Hey you," he said in a croaky voice.

"Hi Dad," said Alex. She blinked. Her lower lip trembled. "Are you gonna be alright?"

"Yeah," he said. "What's the matter? Don't I look alright."

She smiled, lighting up the room. Her watery eyes glowed in tender admiration. He glanced at the full water jug nearby.

Seeing his look, Alex poured him a cup and he drank it quickly. She refilled him another. He took a sip, then set the cup down.

The door opened. Meghan peeked her head into the room.

"It's okay," said Alex.

Meghan tiptoed in, followed by Jill, who looked like she hadn't slept for three days. Clearly uncomfortable, they stopped ten feet from the bed and stood there.

They shot furtive glances at Gregory, then looked away, feeling awkward at his physical condition. He looked as if he'd been used as a punching bag. His body and face were battered and bandaged. Embarrassed to

meet his gaze, they focused on everything but him. Their eyes bounced around the room like wayward billiard balls.

Jill found it especially difficult to look at Gregory. When she did glance at his face, waves of guilt flooded over her. For calling him an asshole. For assuming that he was a greedy realtor. For throwing him into a category when she had so little to go on. She had misjudged this man.

"We went to get something to eat and then thought maybe we could see you," Alex said as she took his hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been run over. Getting a lot of sleep. That helps."

"The nurse said you'll get better," Alex said, brushing his hair away from his eyes as if he were the child and she the parent.

"Yeah. And no small thanks to that guy, the one that saved you," said Gregory, looking around as if Egan might be there as well.

"I know," said Alex. "He disappeared again. Jill went to look for him but he wasn't there."

Jill stepped closer to the bed. "Oh, I'll find him again, Mr. Wells. Don't you worry." Jill was surprised how fast she was speaking. Guilt put the pedal to the floor. "I found him before, you know. Like you said, about the twenty-five grand reward. And I know he wants the fifty grand and so..."

Gregory held up his hand to silence her, a warm but tired smile on his face.

"Don't worry, Jill." He looked at her with kind eyes, as if to say it doesn't matter how rude you were to me in Central Park. "You'll get your reward."

Jill looked a little sheepish as she smiled and nodded.

"Thanks, Mr. Wells, and I'm sorry," her fingers moving wildly as if trying to pick out the right words from the air, "about..."

Gregory held up his hand again and his eyes started to close.



A SHORT while later, Alex and Meghan got back to their apartment. It was past midnight. They removed their coats and hung them on the antique coat rack near the door.

A knocking sound interrupted the silence. They looked around. Then, Meghan realized where it came from.

"Hey it's the guy!" she said as she hurried over to the window. Alex just stood and waited. Meghan opened the window and Egan once more climbed stiffly into their apartment.

"Thanks," he said through gritted teeth. He stepped into the light of the kitchen.

“Oh my!” said Meghan when she saw his face properly.

He had changed his clothes and washed but still looked as if he had just come straight from the fight. Both of his eyes were black and his lips were cut and swollen. The rest of his face was covered with bruises. He tried to smile, but it was clearly painful for him to move his mouth.

“Have you been to hospital?” asked Meghan as Alex stepped forward. She, too, looked very concerned now.

Egan shook his head.

“What about your leg?” asked Alex as both she and Meghan looked at his calf. It was starting to bleed through his pants again.

“Did it myself,” muttered Egan. “The ten-story climb opened it up again.”

“Come with me, let’s clean it and dress it again,” said Meghan, taking his hand. Egan thought it felt so soft and delicate.

He glanced at Alex and she just smiled briefly as he walked past her and followed Meghan into the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub as Meghan got the First Aid kit out again. As she squatted down to lift up his pants leg, she glanced at her watch.

“I have to go out, but I have a few minutes.”

Egan smiled at her.

Quietly, Meghan took off his old dressing that was poorly applied, cleaned the two wounds, and put on a new

one. Again, Egan found her touch to both gentle and also, he admitted to himself, exhilarating at the same time. Once she'd finished she looked up and their eyes locked. In the same way he could recall the photographs from his camera, he brought back to his mind with perfect clarity the image of when he could see Meghan's naked body down the top of her t-shirt. Little did he know that Meghan was remembering when she had watched him in the shower.

"There you go," said Meghan, breaking the moment and standing up before she did something rash. "Now, I've got to go and I'll leave you to talk to Alex. I know you want the reward money from her father."

Egan looked up at her and nodded. He had almost forgotten about being with Jill, and her telling Alex and her father to come to the subway.

Meghan gave him a peck on the cheek where he had no cuts and then she left the bathroom. Egan followed her as quickly as he could but by the time he walked into the living room, Meghan had already disappeared. He looked over to Alex, who was sitting on the couch.

"I have something of yours," Egan said.

"What?" Alex said eagerly.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the patch, with the flag of Denmark, still attached to the piece of jacket that had been ripped away during the subway rescue. He handed it to Alex.

She took it and closed both of her hands over it

and looked at Egan and began to cry. "Thank you." She hugged him. A minute later, she pulled away.

She bit her lip and looked away. Then, she glanced at him and looked down.

"Why didn't you tell me about the camera?" Alex asked, her voice sounding like music to Egan's ears. "I would have given it to you."

Egan remained silent. He eased himself beside her into the sofa. Alex put out a hand to steady him as he pushed out his bad leg.

"Why didn't you tell me," she said, "that it was you who had saved me? That it was your camera?"

Egan shrugged his shoulders.

"I would have given it to you," she said. "Certainly, if I knew that it was you who had saved me."

She took his hand and squeezed it gently. Egan felt warm all over. The sound of her voice, like the rustle of wind blowing across a lake. Her fingers in his. It felt like home. Peaceful. Quiet. Safe.

"Where do you live?" she asked. "Where do you come from? Why did you save me? How do you run so fast and jump so far? Who are you?"

Egan squeezed her hand gently and looked into her eyes. She looked straight ahead, then at the ground. Clearly, she was feeling something.

"Why did you save me?" she asked quietly. Egan took a deep breath.

"I felt connected to you." His voice was a low rumble, sounding like gravel being turned in a cement mixer. It was authoritative yet relaxing at the same time. The tone of his voice made Alex feel safe. Alex stopped moving her fingers.

"But you don't know me," Alex said. She withdrew her hand from his, and shifted in her position. "How can you feel connected to someone you don't know?"

Egan shrugged. "I feel like I do know you. When I first saw you, when I was taking pictures, I felt something."

Alex took his hand.

"But more, because of something my father said to me," continued Egan.

Alex turned and studied his face carefully, looking for clues. "What did he say?" Egan shook his head.

"What?"

"I'll tell you one day."

Alex pursed her lips and furrowed her brows, clearly disappointed at the answer. She moved closer to Egan and took his hand.

"I felt something too," Alex started. "That night on the subway and again later." Her eyes began welling up with tears. "I just wanted to say," the tears began their slow race down her beautiful cheekbones, "Thank you for saving me."

Egan simply nodded. Inside, he felt an awakening, a coming to life. An emotional storm was shaping to life inside of him. Feelings of warmth and familiarity flooded

his senses. His physical condition was such that he could not manifest how he felt inside. Now, it was Egan who looked straight ahead. She was looking straight at him, with tenderness and respect.

With just one finger, Alex turned his face toward hers. She looked at him straight in the eyes.

As his gaze met hers, Egan felt that same feeling of connectedness that he felt when he saw her in the subway car. His hands trembled with anticipation.

Slowly, she leaned her head toward his and kissed him gently on his sore and damaged lips. As her lips met his, Egan felt her warmth, her tenderness, her insecurities, her ambition, her curiosity, and her desire to find her place in life. Her lips felt nice against his, but as she held them against his, he did not feel at peace. Something was wrong.

After a few seconds, she moved her head away, continuing to stare at him with questioning eyes. Where his eyes before had radiated love and warmth, they now radiated curiosity and familiarity.

Egan felt how uncomfortable she was. Not understanding how to explain his feelings, he looked away.

Alex thought she understood. "I'm sorry," she said. "It probably hurts because you're still sore."

Egan turned to look at her, gazing at her beautiful face and sparkling eyes. He continued to look into her eyes. Feeling his gaze, she shifted her eyes around the room. Then, she looked directly at him.

Without a word, she sensed what he was feeling. As the light danced off the colors of his eyes, and the colors shifted from green to brown, she began to understand. Everything was coming into focus.

Something in his look told her that he felt it was not the right thing to do. She still felt 'connected' to him as he had described it but now it was not in the way she'd been thinking before. She realized that she had, in fact, understood Egan perfectly. It felt to him as if some barrier between them had been broken, as if they had both been walking on eggshells around each other but could not relax. On his part, Egan still thought her incredibly beautiful, but now perhaps they could just be friends. He thought again about Meghan and now everything became clear. Suddenly, Alex broke his reverie.

"So why did you come again tonight?" she asked.

"I wanted to see you."

"Really?" Alex smiled. Egan nodded.

"And your friend. To see if you were all right." Silence.

"The reward," Alex said. "My dad can probably get it the first of next week." Egan looked at Alex and nodded.

"So, come then. Or anytime," she added with a grin.

Egan managed to smile back and then he slowly stood up. She looked at him with fondness and admiration. Her eyes were lit up. She stood up and hugged him. Then, she kissed him again, slowly on the lips.

"Thank you."

Egan gave her a shy smile and nodded. Then, he left.



OVER THE next three days, Meghan and Alex visited Gregory. When they weren't around, he was sleeping, reading, or answering questions from cops about what had happened, and the mob involvement with his attempted murder. Because he had survived the attempt on his life, the assumption was made that a possibility of another hit was still there. Because of this, a cop was stationed at his door 24-7. A series of three cops, working eight hours each, rotated shifts.

Because Gregory's injuries were severe, and the risk of infection high, doctors suggested he remain in the hospital for a few weeks. Initially, Gregory argued with them. Then, after listening to the risks involved that might occur due to an early departure, he heeded their advice. Alex visited regularly to chat, talk about current events, and discuss articles in the New York Times. One day, she surprised him with a current bestseller by one of his favorite authors. For Gregory, the injury turned out to be a blessing, in that he reconnected with his daughter and enjoyed reading and watching PBS. He even began a journal to inventory his life and make plans for the future. For him, the hospital stay gave him time to reflect. The entire situation became an epiphany for him.

Even Edgar, the newspaper editor, who looked as if he had stepped from a caricature sketch of his own profession, visited Gregory. Because the situation was still under investigation, Edgar took notes and recordings off the record for potential use at some future date. He wanted first dibs on the story. So far, with the recordings and notes that he had, he was streets ahead of anyone else. Other reporters called, emailed, and visited, but Gregory kept mum. Because he had heard about Edgar from Jill, he felt he could trust him with the story. In secret, and using his notes, Edgar had already started writing a treatment for a novel about what had happened over the last few weeks. Visions of bestseller status danced his head, with royalty checks arriving in the mail that would enable him to quit his job and enjoy the city as tourist, instead of toiling its concrete labyrinth like a worker ant.

On the morning of his third day at the hospital, a forensic analyst visited Gregory. With the supervision of the nurse, she took blood samples and tissue samples from his injuries. Later, he learned that the forensic analysis had proved valuable. The evidence linked his attacker to the deaths of the drug dealers and the attacks on the people in the park.

While the particular perpetrator was still at large, through the attack on Gregory, all these crimes had been linked to the mob. The pressure was very much on the mob boss who had orchestrated the hit.

Along with the twenty-four hour shift cops that guarded Gregory's room, an undercover police presence had been stationed in the hospital. During the several weeks of Gregory's stay, they had arrested a guy attempting to poison his meal. For twelve hours, they grilled him until he finally broke down, revealing the names and whereabouts of two mobsters. This confession led to the arrest of Rich, the sweaty benchwarmer who stabbed Gregory in the leg.

Gregory fully cooperated with the police. When interviewed, he told them about the factory and the torching of his car. More work needed to be done by the police in leaking a few stories around. Still, Gregory reckoned that, with his would-be attacker fingering Rich and others, the threats would eventually disappear. In order to further protect himself, he devised another plan, one that he did not share with the police. Once he was out of hospital, he planned to find another property the mob would like and get them a very good deal on it. He knew that the mob had infiltrated the police force and vice-versa, and that the only way to keep everything contained was to accommodate everyone, at least on some level, and to make adjustments along the way.

The mobster that had tried to poison Gregory, the same mobster that had confessed to the police, knew he was in serious trouble. Like Gregory, he knew the mobsters had men on the inside of the force, and that

a mark had been put on his back. Within twenty-four hours of his confession, he disappeared. No one knew anything. And if they did know, no one was saying.

Hundreds of feet below the New York City subway system, in the world below, the situation was taking a completely different turn. Despite the crass behavior of the watchers who had broken the rule of no-contact with the world above, a higher code was upheld. Togrul refused to confess.

After Togrul returned, battered and bruised, from the night of mayhem, news of the incidents had spread around quickly in the world of the watchers. Within hours, without even getting any treatment for his injuries, he was summoned before the elders. Although rumors had circulated about his exploits, and those of his followers, none could be substantiated. Regardless of the evidence, however, the elders determined that with his irresponsible behavior and violence, he had put the whole existence of his people in jeopardy.

The elders convened, then returned with their judgment: solitary confinement for two months. They offered him a reprieve of one month if he gave the names of his followers who had also gone with him to the human world. Togrul chose to keep quiet. His silence won him disdain from the elders. But his popularity with his followers soared due to his loyalty in keeping their identities secret. Before he was taken away, Togrul did

one more act of loyalty himself. He sent out word that Egan was not to be harmed in any way for his part in Togrul's troubles and that he was, in fact, to be respected.

Egan had initially thought himself foolish for allowing Togrul to live. Later on, Egan would learn the value of this gesture.

REVELATIONS

EGAN SPENT the next week recovering, mostly staying in bed and sleeping. Ramone visited him. Togrul's followers, who wanted to hear the full story of the subway fight, visited him as well. Egan agreed to tell them the story at some future point.

A week following the event, late one night, Egan was at his desk. On top of it, beside a large 17" monitor, sat a few maps, an Amtrak brochure, several brochures from different bus companies and a small travel notebook. Below the desk, the computer hummed irregularly as the fan battled the heat from the internal dust-covered motherboard. Low volume crunching sounds emanated from the vent at the base of the tower. Amidst the noise and the brochures, Egan was formulating his plan.

Ramone knocked at the door.

"You don't have to knock."

"I know." Ramone entered the room, eyeballing the mess on his desk.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "You gonna go somewhere?"

"Yeah."

"How's the leg?"

"Getting better."

Ramone took his usual place on the floor.

"Where you headed?"

Egan gave him a peculiar look. "North."

"I was wondering," started Egan, "if you could help me." A few seconds of silence.

"I need some money. Humans money -"

"You got fifty-thousand," interrupted Ramone.

"I got three thousand," said Egan. "Just enough to cover the down payment for the lawyer."

"I know that you were... running with Togrul."

Those words, "running with Togrul," sat like a trapeze hanging in midair, waiting to be grabbed by Ramone.

Egan glanced furtively at Ramone, then looked away. Ramone knew what Egan was getting at. They both did.

"Togrul put the word out that you are to be treated with respect." Ramone paused, collecting his thoughts. "I think I can get you some."



LATER THAT week, Egan traveled by train to Vermont. The views, as the train rolled from New York City toward Vermont, were breathtaking. Fall had arrived in her full glory. The trees with their abundant leaves and beautiful nuances in the colors of orange, yellow, brown, and shades in between, fluttered to say hello as the train passed.

Once he arrived at the small town in Vermont, he checked in at a nearby hotel, visited a cafe where he devoured three plates of breakfast and downed multiple cups of hot tea, then returned to his room, showered, and went straight to bed.

The next day, he met the lawyer he had hired to handle things with the court and the prison. He spent a few hours discussing the situation, then paid him and left. As it would take him a few hours to draw up the legal paperwork, the lawyer instructed him to return the next day. Egan returned to his room mid-afternoon, watched TV for a bit, showered, dressed, and left. The weather was crisp and the breeze perfectly tolerable. For hours, Egan roamed the avenues of the small town, walking from one end to the other. On the return trip, he walked through the park. The next morning, he met the lawyer, went over the paperwork, signed it, and returned to the hotel to gather his belongings for the return train to the city.

By the time Egan had finished his business in Vermont, a few days had passed. His next order of business was

collecting the reward money. He felt embarrassed about requesting money from a guy in a hospital bed, even if he had saved his life. But he had to have it wired to the lawyer's account within seventy-two hours. The previous week, Gregory had notified him that the money was ready for pick up.

On the steps of Union Square, directly across the street from Whole Foods, they met. Alex arrived first, looking exhausted but beautiful. Then, Meghan, with her shoulder bag. They talked, waiting for Jill and Egan. Ten minutes later, Jill stormed up the subway steps, head down, and texting furiously until Meghan shouted, "Hey Jill!" and got her attention. Jill looked up then lowered her gaze continuing to text, fielding questions for potential studio apartment possibilities, while walking toward them.

A few minutes later, Egan arrived, dressed in upscale casual clothes, complete with scarf and top coat. Meghan and Jill looked him up and down, then complimented his style. Jill was too buried in her texts to notice anything. They descended into the subway. Egan walked with a slight limp.

"You gonna be alright?" asked Meghan. Egan nodded and gave a slight smile.

From the 14th Street Union Square subway, they rode the #4 express train uptown. It was Thursday evening and the subway car was packed with people. Due to the

fact that Monday was a holiday and people had arranged to have Friday off for a long weekend, the car was more crowded than the usual evening 5:00 rush hour.

One by one, Alex, Meghan, Jill, and Egan filed into the congestion of sardined bodies, finding air pockets barely big enough for them to place both feet, and grabbing the nearest handrail to steady themselves. The subway car was stuffed with New York City prisoners wearing different uniforms but still prisoners, nonetheless. Like weeds fighting for sunlight and oxygen in a cramped space, the people swayed and moved together as the train bounced and bumped along the track. Despite the fact that no one talked to anyone, it was easy to identify them by their wardrobe and facial expressions: Business suits with messenger bags. Waiters wearing black pants, black button up shirt, black shoes. Dust covered service workers wearing coveralls, hats, with a tool bag at their feet. Long legged, large eyed, giraffe necked models, hoping to be ignored, dressed down in slim fit jeans, loose fitting t-shirts, cashmere pullovers, and leather jackets, but still looking beautiful. And the hipster guys, with their Chitka boots, their skinny jeans, flannel shirts, Buddy Holly glasses, and beards and mustaches and perfectly-tousled shaggy hair, trying to ignore other hipsters who were dressed exactly the same way.

A slender hand found its way among the waists, coats, and bags, reaching its destination. Unexpected-

ly, as he was looking out the window, Egan felt the soft hand reach into his. He felt warmth rising into his hands and moving through his entire body. He looked up to see Meghan with a smile in her eyes. She gave him a short squeeze. He gave her a look that sent shivers up her spine.

An hour later, they arrived at the hospital, checked in with the cop at the door, then walked into Gregory's room. It had been two weeks since Egan had seen him. Gregory looked noticeably fatter.

Alex embraced her father. Meghan glanced back and forth from Egan to Gregory. Jill had her head buried in her phone, thumbs furiously texting, answering the incessant buzzes of incoming texts from brokers, leasing agents, and realtors. Small talk filled the room until the reason for the visit, specifically for Egan and Jill, made itself apparent.

"Egan," said Gregory. "Come here, young man and shake my hand. You not only saved Alex's life but mine as well."

Egan walked to the side of the bed. He had seen pictures of humans shaking hands but had never actually done it. He extended his hand and opened his palm, stretching each finger as if he was hoping to dry his nails from a recent manicure.

Gregory looked at Egan's hand with a bewildered smile and his thick eyebrows furrowed like two caterpillars whispering secrets to each other. Egan's hand disap-

peared into Gregory's large hands as if being swallowed up by a baseball glove. At the touch of Egan's palms, Gregory felt astonished by the roughness and callouses on the hand of a kid so young. To him, he felt like he was shaking the hands of a fifty-year-old construction worker. In the three seconds that Gregory shook Egan's hand, thoughts and questions flooded his mind as he wondered who Egan really was.

As they withdrew hands, Egan looked at Gregory knowingly. At that moment, Gregory had the feeling that Egan had just read his mind.

"I know," Gregory said, "that this is none of my business. But I'm curious."

"Dad," Alex started.

Gregory gave her a reassuring look.

"What are—"

"Ughhh," sighed Alex.

"... you planning to do with the money," Gregory finished. Alex dropped her head in embarrassment.

The room fell silent. All eyes on Egan. Even Jill looked up from texting. Egan looked out the window, looked directly at Gregory then out the window again, surveying the nighttime view of Harlem.

"Someone needs it more than I do." His low voice echoed with such confidence that it sounded foreign to Egan himself.

Gregory, Alex, Meghan, and Jill looked back and forth

at Egan and one another, trying to unravel the meaning of his cryptic response.

A few seconds passed, then Meghan shot him an admiring glance. "You're something else."

"That's a good thing," Gregory added.

"Yeah, it is," agreed Alex.

Egan smiled a genuine smile, looking at this group of people he was growing to love. Then, embarrassed, he glanced at the invisible world of answers between his feet.

Jill's phone buzzed and her gaze returned to her glowing screen in her palm.

"Demanding," Gregory said, noting Jill's obsession with her smart phone. "Who would've known that a device the size of a remote control would consume so much of our time."

"Sorry," Jill muttered, eyes glued to her cell phone, continuing to text. "It's leasing agent."

Gregory reached into a folder beside his bed and retrieved two checks. He held them out.

Finally, Jill looked up from her phone and slipped it into her pocket. Eagerly, she walked to the bed, looked at the checks and took one. She lifted it to the light and studied it. The uncertainty that her eyes had displayed moments earlier melted away. She walked over to Gregory, leaned in toward him and gave him a gentle hug.

She floated back to her spot in the room. Her cell

phone buzzed. She ignored it. Egan approached Gregory and looked at the check.

"Is it possible for you to wire this to someone?"

"Sure," Gregory said.

Egan retrieved a piece of paper from his pocket with the bank account details from the lawyer in Vermont and gave it to Gregory.

Jill stepped forward. "You're giving it away." Egan nodded.

"You're not gonna keep it?" Meghan asked. "Any of it?"

Egan gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head.



TWO HOURS later, the four friends, Alex, Meghan, Jill, and Egan had a corner table in a low-lit pub in The Meatpacking District. Jill had invited everyone to join her to celebrate her freedom from the wicked witch—her current roommate.

Alex left to go to the bathroom and Jill went to get drinks. Egan insisted he only wanted juice. Egan and Meghan now sat alone in the booth. She put her hand on his. Once more, she turned to him.

"How's your mouth doing?" she asked with a grin.

As much as he was not from this world, Egan understood her meaning. Then, he remembered again something he'd read that the humans said.

“Oh, it’s doing okay. But it might help if someone were to kiss it better.” Egan desperately hoped he’d got this right.

Meghan gave him an even bigger smile, her eyes looking as bright as the lights that reflected in them.

“Like this...” she said in her best sultry voice as she put her arms around his neck.

Oh yes, thought Egan, exactly like that.

A few moments later they were interrupted by a loud cough. They looked up to see Jill with their drinks. She was smiling awkwardly.

“Okay,” said Meghan as she sat back. She continued to hold Egan’s hand.

Alex returned from the bathroom. Then, Egan had to use the restroom. When he returned, Jill and Alex were talking to each other and glancing at Meghan with mischievous smiles. Egan knew. He sat down, squeezed Meghan’s hand underneath the table, and laughed. At any other time, he would have felt embarrassed, but the laughter and general merriment had left him feeling relaxed and comfortable.

As the evening wore on, the three girls started to get a little drunk. Jill, usually reserved in the company of new friends, shared stories of her adventures chasing celebrities for the four-figure payday shot. Meghan told the funny story of her first art gallery show, in an illegally occupied squat on the border of East New York. No one

came, except for homeless people who ate all the food. Alex divulged her funny experiences from attending casting calls for shady producers of independent movies. Egan listened with great interest, soaking up the conversation. For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged. This once group of strangers were becoming close friends. Egan relaxed. He felt at ease with his human side. He knew that if he wanted to have a relationship with Meghan, he would have to explain everything to her but that could wait a while.

At the end of the night, they piled in a cab, continuing to talk and laugh as it raced through the streets like a little yellow bug among thousands of other yellow bugs, navigating through a forest of concrete, steel, brick, glass, and lights. After the cab dropped Jill off and they said their goodbye, Jill handed the driver a fifty and told him to keep the change. The cab driver smiled, thanked her profusely, and then drove Alex, Meghan, and Egan to Alex and Meghan's apartment.

Egan spent the night on the couch. He awoke to Meghan making breakfast and the smell of frying bacon, eggs, and whole wheat bread in the toaster. Alex prepared coffee in a French press. Five minutes later, they were sitting at the small dining room table, enjoying a delicious and greasy feast.

After finishing half their coffee, Meghan and Alex, fueled by the caffeine and stirred by curiosity, assaulted and peppered Egan with questions.

"So what are you gonna do with the money?" asked Alex.

"Yeah," said Alex. "Who are you giving it to?"

They asked these questions, in different words, over and over again. Egan smiled at them, and then returned his attention to the food. He smeared thick slabs of European butter onto the whole wheat toast, spread blackberry jam on it, lopped eggs and bacon onto the toast, and gobbled it up.

He continued eating. They continued asking questions. Finally, he cleaned his plate. He lifted the coffee to his mouth and took a long gulp. Then, taking in a deep breath through his nostrils, he looked at them both.

"Is it true?" asked Meghan. "Are you finished?"

Egan leaned in to her and gave her a serious look. "I am never finished," he said in a low voice.

They all burst out laughing.

Again, for the fourth or fifth time, Meghan asked Egan what he planned to do with the money.

"Someone needs it more than I do," Egan said, repeating what he had told Gregory.

"You need it," said Meghan. "You're homeless." Egan shook his head.

Alex glared at Meghan.

"I have to go," Egan said.

"Where?" said Meghan. "Where do you live? Who are you?"

"I have to go to Vermont," said Egan. "I'm leaving tonight. It has to do with the money."

"I wanna come," shouted Meghan. "I've never been to Vermont. I heard it's beautiful. Can I come? Please?"

"You shouldn't go by yourself," cautioned Alex.

Meghan shot Alex a puzzled look.

"I mean, I should come with you," said Alex, leaving a space between the lines big enough for a semi to drive through.

Then, Meghan understood. She looked at Egan as if asking if it would be okay if Alex came, too. Egan looked at Alex, smiled, and nodded.

That evening, the three of them boarded the Metro North toward New Hampshire, then transferred to the Amtrak to Vermont. The train was uncrowded and quiet. They looked out the window at the passing scenery—small towns, mountains in the distance, trees, and farms. One by one, lulled by the motion of the train, they fell asleep, each leaning on the other's shoulder, like a pile of carefully set dolls.

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THE NEXT morning, Egan checked into the same hotel he'd stayed the previous week. Then, he walked them to the storefront restaurant for breakfast. He grabbed a donut, then left to confer with the lawyer. Alex

and Meghan ate and talked, their conversation a series of unanswered questions and fanciful suspicions. They wondered what they were doing here and who Egan was.

By the time Egan had finished with the lawyer and returned to the restaurant, the girls had already left. He returned to the hotel and found them on the bed. Alex texting. Meghan flipping through channels.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go.”

For the next few hours, he showed them around the town. They continued with their questions, but Egan remained quiet. He appeared to have something heavy on his mind, but neither Alex nor Meghan could pry it out.

Later in the afternoon, they returned to the hotel and Egan had Alex call for a cab. Once the cab arrived to pick them up, Egan handed the driver a piece of paper. The cab drove away, winding up a road on the outskirts of town.

Alex looked at Meghan with a wicked grin. “He’s gonna kills us!”

They all laughed, but Egan’s smile faded quickly and he looked out the window. As the cab ascended the hill, the speed slowed considerably. The cab was crawling. Egan looked over the driver’s shoulder, at the digital clock on his dashboard and at the speedometer. “Can you drive faster.”

His statement was a command more than a question.

The tone of his voice, a low rumble, weighted with confidence and a little concern, carried with it the weight of authority.

The driver gunned it.

A half-hour later, the cab rolled into the parking lot of a shabby looking convenient store. Attached to it was an auto body shop filled with cars in various states of duress.

Alex looked again at Meghan. "This is where we die."

Meghan, already nervous, burst out laughing. Egan smiled and shook his head.

"Seriously, though," said Alex. "Are we gonna die? What are we doing here?"

"You're making a horror film, aren't you?" teased Meghan, only half-joking.

"You'll see," said Egan.

"Famous last words," quipped Alex.

Alex paid the cab driver. Then, Egan leaned in to him, and asked him if he would mind staying for a half hour. He sighed, looked at a notebook, filled with scribbles that sat on the passenger side of the front seat.

"I could eat," the cab driver said. He exited the cab and walked into the convenient store and ordered a hoagie.

Egan and Alex and Meghan stood in the parking lot. A serious look came over Egan's face.

To the left of the parking lot, the sun was setting in the west. Against the crisp fall air the light was magnificent, spreading out its life giving glow across the landscape

of mountains, valleys, and low lying hills, that appeared like a rumpled comforter sprinkled with patches of trees, bursting with leaves in an explosion of colors—yellow, orange, light brown, bright yellow, dark orange, light orange, light red, dark red, and all the color gradients in between. A gentle cool wind rolled through the leaves. They fluttered as if waving to The Creator in a gesture of appreciation.

Across the road from the convenient store, the mountain dropped fifty feet and leveled out to a flat plateau for miles across in all directions. On the plateau sat a prison, surrounded by an exercise yard, and a parking lot littered sparsely with a few vehicles, trucks, SUVs, two prison buses, and a few police cars. A tall fence surrounded the entire prison and yard.

“What are we doing here?” Meghan asked in a serious voice.

“Yeah,” agreed Alex. “This is getting weird.”

Egan surveyed the property and signaled the trio to follow.

They entered the convenient store. An unhappy looking, middle-aged man stood behind the counter. He eyed them suspiciously. The cabbie looked up, mid-bite into his hoagie. Alex and Meghan wandered the aisles of candy. Egan just stared out the window. He trained his eyes on the prison parking lot. A taxicab turned into it, then slowly moved toward a parking spot near the entrance.

Egan walked into the aisle where Alex and Meghan were wandering. His eyes were lit up. "C'mon."

They followed him outside into the parking lot. The clerk watched them from the window. The cab driver, still chewing his food, walked to the window. He watched them while taking a long slurp from his forty-ounce cup of soda.

Outside, Egan brought the two girls to the edge of the parking lot. They stood near a patch of grass that ran along the inclined road that led back to the highway. He reached into his messenger bag and pulled out an industrial looking pair of binoculars with a strap attached to it. He handed it to Meghan.

"Here. Keep your eyes on the entrance." He instructed. "You'll see a woman leave. That's who you're watching. Share them with Alex."

Every time Egan spoke, Meghan felt relaxed and safe. His voice comforted her. Her attraction and curiosity for Egan was beginning to take root.

"Who is it?" asked Alex. Egan didn't answer.

"What about you?" asked Meghan. "How are you gonna see?"

Egan looked at her with a smile that opened her heart in a good way. "I don't need binoculars."

"Do you know this person?" Alex asked. "Is this what you used the money for?"

Egan watched carefully, moving his focus from the front door to the cab driver. The phone, sitting on the

passenger seat beside the cab driver, lit up and started making a noise. The cab driver grabbed the phone, said a few words, and then placed it back on the seat. He reached below the steering wheel. The trunk popped open. The cab driver got out and stood by the car, watching the prison doors. He lit a cigarette. Egan focused on the entrance of the prison. The front door to the prison opened slowly.

A striking, but daunted looking woman, in her mid-fifties or early sixties appeared in the doorway. She was gaunt, with a beautiful bone structure, a high jaw line, full lips, and piercing eyes. Her dirty blond hair, with streaks of gray, was pulled back into a ponytail. Even though she looked pale and slightly malnourished, she was beautiful. She looked strikingly similar to Alex.

Upon seeing her, Meghan gasped. She lowered the binoculars, put her left hand to her mouth, and with her right hand passed the binoculars to Alex. "She looks kind of like you, but older."

Now curious and somewhat frightened, Alex grabbed the binoculars and brought them quickly to her face. She gazed at the face of the former prisoner standing in the entrance. Alex opened her mouth, an unconscious reaction as a wave of familiarity swept over her.

Egan watched Tess. He glanced at Alex, studying her face, comparing it to Tess's face.

Meghan stood close to Alex, so they could share the binoculars without missing anything.

"Did you bail her out?" Meghan asked, looking through the binoculars and putting things together in her mind. "Is she related to you?"

Egan nodded and took Alex's hand. Alex turned to look at Egan who was looking at her.

"Oh my..." Alex started. "Who is she?" Alex asked, her hands gripping the binoculars, her eyes fixed on the lady at the entrance. "She looks like me but ... older."

Egan did not answer.

Alex lowered the binoculars and looked at Egan.

"Tell me," said Alex. "Who is she? Is she ..."

Egan continued watching Tess.

Once more, Alex brought the binoculars to her eyes. She watched Tess with fascination and curiosity, a feeling familiarity sweeping over her.

"Tell me," repeated Alex. "Who is she?"

Egan placed his hand on Alex's shoulder. Alex lowered the binoculars and looked at Egan. He was looking at her with a gaze that spoke of sympathy and fondness and admiration.

"She's ..." he started, searching for the words, "your mom. And my mom, too."

"What?" gasped Alex. "How? How is that possible?"

"We have a lot to talk about," said Egan.

With measured steps, the former prisoner, Tess Hallingsworth, exited the prison entrance and walked outside the fence that ran along the perimeter. Once she stepped

outside the fence, she stopped in her tracks. She stretched her hands out and brought them up to the heavens. As she looked around, her expression seemed to change to one of hopefulness and determination. She closed her eyes and took in a long, slow, deep breath. Then, she opened her eyes and moved her head from left to right, enjoying one of the most beautiful views—sunset in autumn in the mountains of Vermont.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “Whoever you are.” Tess stared openmouthed at the beauty all around her, before she burst into tears.

To be continued ...

