

Currently Untitled

By Laura Hilliger

Written and presented in bits and pieces, iterated upon and then recompiled and presented in its entirety, all over a really ridiculous amount of time, for E.

CHAPTER ONE

I'm laying in a hospital bed after an emergency tonsillectomy. As a child, having your tonsils removed is no big deal, but as an adult it's a bit of a shit storm. When I came in, it was almost too late, an abscess on my right tonsil was infected with some sort of plague. It was eating quickly into my lymph nodes, and the doctors figured the best thing to do was cut it out. Fast. I was fully conscious when I signed the form. Ten minutes later I was in a hospital gown and parked in a yellow hallway. The scrub nurse asked me when I had last eaten.

"Two days ago," I wasn't lying, I had been forgetting to eat lately, and my ribcage was evidence.

"Well, usually that's not such a good thing, but at the moment, that's quite convenient. I'm just going to put this butterfly needle into your hand, look away, ok?" I didn't look away. I never look away from needles. I like needles. I like what it means if you have a needle being put into one of your veins. It means drugs are coming. Some sort of external medication will be flowing into you shortly. At that moment, I knew it would be surgical grade narcotics. I was already dreaming of opiates.

The nurse pushed me down the hall into the operating room. Other nurses hooked me up to electrodes. I said "I'm a computer person, I quite like all of these cables." No one laughed.

"We're all set," one of the nurses said to the surgeon.

He looked at me, "Are you ready?"

"Do I have a choice?" Again, no laughter.

"Goodnight sweet lady," the nurse said as he pushed the drugs into me. I didn't want to sleep. The narcotics washed over me and I felt that feeling of relief I hadn't felt in years. That thick, warm blanket of opiates. That trusted numbness. I didn't want to sleep.

"Wow, most people would be out by now," I heard echo through the chamber that used to hold my brain.

"Should we give her more?"

"No, she'll go, just give it a minute." And then that minute came.

When I woke up, four scrub nurses were watching over me in the "Wake Up Room". I had read the name of the room while I was parked in the yellow hallway. I thought it showed lack of creativity. The nurses weren't watching over me so much as standing next to me. I was just another patient. Just floating through. I would be taken to the recovery ward soon, no connections to be made. They were younger than I was, I'm sure of it. I was groggy.

"Welcome back," said the only female. She had red hair and a nice round, plump face. She wasn't plump, just her childish cheeks. She felt alone there, always having to play with the

boys. I wanted her to like me.

"I don't feel quite right."

"On a scale of one to ten, ten being the most severe, how's your pain level?"

"8 and a half," I was lying. My pain level was much less, but I wanted more drugs. I like hospital grade opiates, and I'd stopped using drugs recreationally, so this was sort of a free for all. I got to take drugs and not feel guilty about it. A little white lie so that I could get rid of the pain and enjoy myself wasn't a bad thing. Not in my opinion. She wrote it down on her pad and then switched out the narcotics bottle flowing into my butterfly needle. I felt the surge immediately. I tried not to smile.

I floated in and out of consciousness for a while, and then they took me upstairs to the Recovery Ward.

Now I'm here. I've been here for five days. They don't want to let me out until the biopsy comes back. They haven't seen that sort of self mutilating cell before. They don't know if I'm contagious. They don't know if it's elsewhere in my body.

About six people have visited me from work, but no one I really like. They all brought cheesy "Get Well Soon!" cards. I always wondered about the exclamation point at the end of "Get Well Soon". Did someone think that that little marker of enthusiasm would facilitate in the curing of what ails? I can understand it on a birthday card, I guess. For some reason those cards are really bothering me.

I've been having a lot of tests. The nurse comes in and says something cryptic, which I don't understand. She then puts a needle in my belly and injects me with something. I've been getting meds every two hours. After the surgery, the meds were good. I got high. But now they've become rather boring. They switched from the fun drugs to the standard ones, and I'm anxious to leave. Yesterday I asked if I could leave.

Two nights ago, I coughed up blood. A lot of blood. I spit it into a paper towel for a while before informing a nurse. I wanted to choke on my own blood. I'd never done that before. Even when I'd gotten into fights, my opponents always stopped beating me up before I had to choke on my own blood. I sat up in my bed feeling a long thread of bloody mucus tickling the back of my throat. In the seconds between bouts of coughing, I could feel that thread vibrating. It was such a curious feeling. When I informed the nurse and showed her handfuls of bloody paper towels, she asked me why I didn't use my call button. That was her reaction. "Why didn't you use your call button?"

Blood was dripping from my chin. There was blood in my mouth. My hospital issued pajamas were splattered like Jeffery Dahmer's basement. The nurse acted like she didn't even notice. She just cleaned me up, inserted a new butterfly needle, and called the doctor who had done my surgery.

The scabs make my mouth taste like old cheese. I've coughed up a few of them. Greenish-yellow patches of goo that slither into the drain when I spit them into the sink. I've been spitting a lot lately, my saliva slithers like the scabs. Slow at first and then when it hits the drain the weight of the matter already pulled in causes the back part of the goo to move more quickly.

I don't eat much, but it doesn't mean that I'm not hungry. The hospital brings me trays of

saltless food. Today I have three pieces of stale bread, a single serving of butter, strawberry jelly, some hazelnut paste and a bit of liverwurst. I hate meat paste. Spreadable meat of any kind makes me want to vomit. I take the liverwurst and squish it onto the underside of the bed. I smile when I think of it rotting there. It will take them forever to figure out what's rotting. It's a hospital, everything smells like rot.

There's a knock on the door. "Come in," I mumble as my mouth is filled with bread. I've used half the butter and half the strawberry jam. It's still a challenge to open my mouth, so I have to slide the bread in at a perfect angle to get it through the hole.

"The chief doctor would like to see you now," the nurse informs me.

I walk to the front office, where the doctor is checking over the patients in his wing. This is the ear, nose, and throat section. This is where they cut off ears and noses and slice people's throats open.

There's an infant with half a nose. His twin brother looks fine. As the nurse passes she looks in, "How's the little guy doing?" The parents smile, they don't look concerned. But their kid looks like his nose got bitten off by a rabid squirrel. He'll never look normal. Even with a fake nose, the kid is doomed to a life of second looks. Those fucking parents don't even care, they're smiling about it.

"Miss? The doctor will see you now."

I walk into the doctors office. He has two examining chairs. Why? He can't look at two people at the same time. Everything is clean and symmetrical.

"Yesterday you begged to leave," he says, as if he had been there.

"Yes, I'm sick of this place, I want out now."

"You can't leave until we find out if whatever it was in your tonsil has spread into your body. We hope we got it, but we can't be sure until the biopsy comes back. We took as much of the tissue as we could."

"Well, you can send me the results, I can return if it's not gone."

"Yes, well the problem is, we don't know if you are contagious."

"Has anyone here gotten sick?"

"No, but we don't know how long you carried the virus before you got sick."

"Yes, so doesn't it stand to reason, that I could have been carrying it for years and the whole fucking world is already sick and keeping me here is useless any damn way?"

"We can't let you go." Of course they can't. It's always the same with authorities. They have their rules to follow, and none of them are rule breakers. They do what they are supposed to do whether it negates rhyme or reason or otherwise. I am not a fan of authority.

"Well, let's take a look at least, see how you're healing," the doctor presses his metal tongue depressor onto my tongue, "just relax," he tells me. "Did you have carrots for dinner?"

I'm surprised at the question. Yes, I had had carrots for dinner, but how could he possibly know that?

"Uh...yes..." I answer, questioningly, expecting an elaboration from him.

"Just a little stuck there," he smiles at me. I try not to laugh, but imagine how disgusting it must be to look down a patients throat and see not only the nearly liquid scabs from surgery, but also food stuck in those scabs. Food from yesterday, food from last night. The scab

growing around the food.

The doctor takes a small vacuum from his toolkit and sucks out the carrot. He pulls the tiny vacuum out of my mouth with the carrot still stuck to it.

“I'm so sorry!” I sputter, but the doctor just waves the apology away. I'm annoyed at his reaction. I've apologized, I want vindication that that was the right thing to do. Why wasn't he revolted by what had just happened?

“Don't worry about it, those scabs get sticky. Your wounds look good, but you'll have to stay until the biopsy comes back, for your own good.”

“And how long might that be?”

“Not more than a couple of weeks.” Inside, I flip out, start yelling about this not being prison and such, but my visible reaction is a simple nod. I have no intention of staying here for two more days, let alone two more weeks.

I don't really have any family, but I have friends. I have a home and pets and a job. I have a pretty typical, every day kind of life. But lately, I've been thinking about escaping. As if I am trapped.

There's just something about the work-a-day world that has been getting to me lately. Everyone has been walking around as if their lives are carved into stone. It's been a long time since I've seen anyone make a brash decision. Everyone does what they're told. I hate that about the world.

I was on a business trip in Bangkok when I first noticed the abscess. My right lymph-node was swollen after a presentation at one of the big Asian technology conventions. We were in town presenting a white paper on sustainable business, that was our cover story anyway. I was really hijacking the speech and presenting our solution to the corporate overtake of the World Wide Web.

I work for a company called Onyx. To the public, we present ourselves as a technology research firm looking into augmented reality, touch technology, and geo-locative identity mapping. We don't actually do any of those things. The CEO, Jacob Sunnard, had been a guerrilla marketer and a punk in his previous life. He fell in love with communication, the very human act of communication. He'd started Onyx to protect the people from the online hijacking of their communications and data. Onyx makes money as a consulting firm. We do underground consulting for underground organizations trying to make a difference in the world of technology. If Jacob agrees with the politics of an organization, we'll get involved.

Onyx approaches organizations that would benefit from our particular expertise and be accepting of our particular methods. No organization has ever turned us away. Ever. We'll help with online security, audience acquisition, targeted campaigning, and various MNBL (“might not be legal”) activities.

We also go around to conferences and talked about the “thievery of mind” or the “capitalization of the soul” because Jacob likes messing with people. Onyx has six employees whose sole job is to write and submit white papers to conferences. Once a paper is accepted, the rest of us research the attendees of the conference and work out which of our messages will make them the most uncomfortable.

I love my work. It allows me to pretend that I'm an activist. Lately though, I feel like I don't make a difference at all.

I was in Bangkok with my colleague, Dan, a short, dumpy party guy. His receding hairline and bargain basement clothes were oblivious to him. He was an arrogant, psychotic son-of-a-bitch and one of the only people in our office I could stand. Other than Dan, Jacob and Eric, I didn't really like my colleagues. It's not that they weren't nice. Most of them were nice, but they were also way too politically correct. They were always looking around before they said anything even slightly off color. Their humor was lacking, and I found myself having to curb my speech. Dan just didn't give a fuck. He was good at his job, and he had fun with his life. Everyone in the office considered him the drunkard, the village idiot. But he got shit done.

We got to Bangkok the same day I got a visit from Aunt Flo. That's always happening to me. I go away, and I get my period or I get sick, and I spend my time noting where the bathrooms are and looking for drug stores. The night before my presentation I had cramps. Really bad cramps. I went wandering about looking for a pharmacy instead of practicing and polishing my presentation.

I'd given versions of this presentation several times before, so I wasn't really worried about embarrassing myself. I just happen to suffer from a little bit of performance anxiety, and when I give a presentation I wanted to "be on rails". I'd learned about being on rails from my last lover. Our relationship last three hours. He said you just say your speech out loud ten times, and then you'll "be on rails", unable to be sidetracked from your purpose.

The next morning the cramps were better thanks to a very nice young lady at the pharmacy who knew exactly which pill to give me. I awoke feeling pretty good about myself. I put on a dress and my new suit jacket and made myself look respectable.

Dan and I took a cab to the convention.

"You look rested, nice dress."

"Yeah, this is my 'look-at-me-I'm-all-grown-up' outfit."

"I'm pretty glad they decided to send you instead of that stuck up bitch June Kim. She is totally not fun. Buzz killlll," Dan had a cappuccino in one hand and his smartphone in the other. "Did you see that story about the baby goats in Seattle?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, dude. They found a bunch of abandoned baby goats walked around in some ritzy suburb. They were all starving and whatnot."

"Why does this matter?"

"They. Found. Baby. Goats. Wandering. Around. In. A. Fucking. Suburb!" Dan speaking was like watching game shows on television. He was always animated, very gestural. His mannerisms reminded me of epilepsy, "It's pandemonium out there. The people are going nuts."

I had the feeling we were going to get into a deep economic discussion if I didn't change the subject.

"You know that guy who works in management, Eric?" Dan knew who I was asking about, the three of us had hid from Random Coworker's retirement party a couple months ago. We'd slipped into the handicap bathroom on the second floor and smoked a spliff. We

had briefly considered going back to the party so that we could have some cake, but changed our minds after realizing that we were all bonkers high. Ever since then, Eric and I have been exchanging this *look*.

“Yeah, I like that guy. A couple days ago, I saw him spill soup on his crotch and totally just not give a shit.”

“Exactly, well he told me to find this guy, Scott Spencer. He was like ‘Tell him you're friends with me, then tell him you're really good friends with Jacob. Be effusive about your like for me in particular. He hates us both. It'll amuse me to hear about your interaction.’”

“That guy is fucking cool.”

“I know, you gotta help me find this Scott Spencer guy. If he hates Eric and Jacob, we can probably make him hate us too.”

“That sounds like a fun game.”

As we pulled up to the convention center, Dan pulled out a mini flask. “It's just two swigs, but it's enough to calm the jitters.”

I tossed back the flask, at nine in the morning. “Thanks,” I said after waiting for the last drop to glide from the rim and fall into my mouth.

“Asshole, I wanted the second one.”

The first couple of hours, we just schmoozed around. I did the networking thing, talked about our mission statement, explained our current projects and markets. I made up thirty different lies, and no one knew the difference. Part of my job was just to talk people into corners. I'd gotten pretty good at it over the years. Really, it's all about reading people. Everyone has their nuances, their tells, that are ready to be exploited.

To get a job at Onyx, you have to be more than meets the eye. All interviewees have an interview with HR, and those that fulfill the basic requirements go to Jacob's house for dinner. It is part of the interview process. Jacob uses that dinner to get an idea about your character. Basically, he gets you drunk on expensive wine and then talks to you about any and everything that comes into his head. Your conversational skills, sarcasm, irony, wit, ability to hold your alcohol – these things are on display, and Jacob makes an assessment of your character based on that one evening. Afterwards, there's another interview with Jacob's right-hand man, Eric. Eric never interviewed me though. Jacob hired me twenty minutes after I arrived at his house.

Everyone had on name tags, so Dan and I branched out to look for Scott. I found him at the OmniGreen Technology booth. Scott stood as if he wear balancing his asshole just above a poison tipped spear. His crisp suit, cufflinks, and penny loafers led me to believe he wasn't interested in OmniGreen's efforts to recycle old hardware and build robots that would tend to our agricultural needs. I texted Dan our location.

As I eavesdropped on the conversation, I listened to Scott sarcastically explain to the OmniGreen people what a “scrapyard artist” was and how fucking stupid they are. Before he could cause those poor hippies to cry, I tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hi, Scott Spencer?”

“Well, hello missy. How can Scott be of service to,” he grabbed my name tag, “Ms. Maggie Lawson?” He was undressing me with his eyes and his tongue was hanging out of his

mouth.

“Oh, I work with Jacob Sunnard and Eric Murphy over at Onyx. They were talking about the AR company you’re on the board of, and I was just looking to hear some more. You know Jacob and Eric? They’re great guys.”

Dan slid in beside me, picking up the thread. “Hey Maggie, were you just talking about Jacob and Eric? I just watched Jacob’s SARDAN 2011 webinar. He’s so brilliant.”

“Yes, I was just telling Scott here how much I like them. I heard Eric was responsible for getting gaming consoles in all our conference rooms.”

Scott studied Dan and me for a moment, and then his vacant look brightened a little. “Oh yes, Jacob and *Eric*. I haven’t seen them in ages. Did Eric get demoted yet for being a dumb ass?” Dan and I look at each other, trying hard not to smile. “No, but seriously! Both of them are just the cat’s meow. What are you? Their fucking fan club?”

“No, no. They’re just, you know, cool is all. They were talking about the new augmented contact lens you guys are creating. All of us were talking about changing our eyes to be that scary violet color from *Children of the Corn*.”

“That’s the kind of stuff you talk about over at Onyx. I mean, I knew you guys were weird, but come on!”

Dan had a new coffee in his hand. It must have been his fourth one already, and it was only ten-thirty. “Oh, Scott. We’re just happy to work for an organization that has more than three weeks vacation a year, and healthcare that takes care of our health. Nice scarf, by the way.”

“Anyway,” I broke in, “I just wanted to let you know that we, and by we I mean mainly me and Eric, are really excited about the developments,” I knew that Scott Spencer and his company weren’t any closer to solving the spatial issues inherent in the project than anyone else.

“Well, yes, we’re definitely lightyears ahead of the competition,” in Scott’s mind, Onyx *was* the competition.

“Ok. Well. It certainly was nice meeting you, shall I tell Eric and Jacob you said ‘hi’?”

“Oh, yes absolutely you should. Just give them a big ol’ hug from me,” Scott smirked and walked away.

“Wait, are you serious!?” I yelled out after him. It wasn’t a brilliant interaction by far, but the mention of Eric had certainly changed Scott’s demeanor. Still, I dreaded calling Eric and telling him it was an anti climatic exchange.

When the keynote started after lunch, I was already ready to leave. There were three people speaking before me. I just sort of zoned out for all of their presentations. There were too many interesting characters in the room to look at. I felt like I was watching a Discovery Channel special on dork fashion. After my presentation, Dan came over and handed me a celebratory Mai Tai. They didn’t even have a bar at the convention.

“Where’d you get this?”

“Don’t worry about it, I got it from someone who knows that these conventions are fucking boring.”

“Someone you know?”

“That guy, over there,” Dan pointed to a tall Asian fellow with a suspiciously large

backpack. "He's the party brigade."

I studied the guy for a moment. Then I took a big swing of the drink. It was delicious. Dan and I got wasted sucking down Backpack Mai Tais. When Dan's wasted, he gets belligerent. He started telling people how boring and common they were. At some point a security guard tried to throw us out. Dan just laughed and said, "Yeah, you want us to leave? Face!" and then turned around and walked back into the crowd.

After Dan had successfully pissed off every one he came into contact with, we decided we should head down to the Blue Elephant for something a little stiffer than a Mai Tai. Dan was more than laced, and I was well on my way to being too fucked up to stand. At three am, Dan was facedown on a dance floor, and I was trying to convince the club bouncer that he didn't need to call the cops. I had to drag Dan outside and throw him into a cab.

When we got back to the hotel, Dan and I stumbled into the elevator. The cab ride had sobered him up enough to fall into walls. Dan slept next to my room in the hallway, and I slept with my head in the toilet. A few hours later, Dan pounded on the door and we both moved to the bed. We started making out, and eventually had awkward, drunk, disgusting sex. I remember waiting for it to be over, but kind of into it at the same time. Afterwards, we both passed out.

When I awoke, Dan was missing, and I had this horrible pain in my throat accompanying the after-drinking-shame. I thought the sore throat was just a remnant from smoking, drinking, and talking too much. I felt like shit, but was supposed to be meeting and greeting some people at the convention. I was already extremely late.

After a thorough shower, I decided to walk to the convention center. It was about a thirty minute walk, but I needed coffee and a bit of time to collect myself. Dan was no where to be found.

As I walked through the streets of Bangkok, I wasn't registering any of the things going on around me. I had a single focus: Don't get fired for being a drunken idiot. I wasn't even completely sure if anyone knew I wasn't doing my job at the moment. I didn't know what was going on, I was still wasted. I finally found a coffee three blocks from the convention center and quickly sucked it down. Then I stood there in front of the café and put on my happy face.

As the day progressed, my throat started to feel tighter and tighter. At around six in the evening, I was feeling so knocked out that I could barely stand. I still hadn't seen Dan, and he wasn't answering his messages. I took a cab back to the hotel and twenty-nine hours later, I was awoken by a banging on my door.

"What the fuck have you been doing?" Dan came into the room and set a half empty bottle of vodka on the table. He kicked off his shoes and slumped into a chair.

"What time is it?"

"It's fucking eleven pm on Wednesday! I've been banging on your door all day. Did you take some of those knock out drugs or what? And what the fuck is that on your neck?"

My throat was hurting more than it had when I went to sleep. As I grabbed at my neck, I felt a golf ball sized growth on the right side.

"Oh Christ! What is that!?"

"I've never seen something that gross," Dan laughed.

"It's not oozing or anything, it's just a swollen lymph-node. It's really swollen. Do me a favor, look down my throat, it feels like I'm swallowing thumbtacks."

"I'm not getting near your mouth. Here, drink this," Dan handed me the half empty bottle of vodka. "It helps."

I had just slept twenty-nine hours and everything had gotten worse, so I took the vodka. What harm can a little joy juice do when you're already nearly dying.

Two days later, I was still drunk as we went to the airport to catch the flight back home. The stale, sticky air in the smoking lounge smelled a little like Tabasco sauce.

"...And those bitches just kept hobbin the knob if you know what I'm saying," Dan was saying. I hadn't heard the beginning of the story. I was still eating glass, and my mouth tasted like the sewage water running down the streets in Bangkok.

"I think I need a doctor," I barely whispered.

"Yeah, well, we've got twenty minutes to board our flight, so first you'll have to haul ass."

"Oh, fuck." I hadn't been paying attention to the clock. I was in no condition to run, but the thought of spending another day here when all I wanted was a doctor, a Western doctor, was motivation enough for me to sling my laptop over my shoulder and run to the gate.

When we arrived they were about to pull the door closed. Dan didn't even pull out his ticket as he raced through the door. "Two more passengers!" He was yelling down the jetway. From behind the gate operator was screaming at us. I pulled Dan to a stop, grabbed his ticket and turned around and breathlessly presented them to the operator.

"Sorry, we have to catch this flight!" Annoyed the gate operator nodded and then let me pass.

When we got to the plane, the flight attendant looked sideways at us. Then she realized we were first class passengers and changed her demeanor. "Oh, we're so glad to have you on board! That was a close one," her left eye hung ever so slightly lower than her right eye, and her pulled back hair pulled her face muscles making her look slightly waxy.

"I want a martini with an extra bottle of gin," Dan told her as he swung into his seat.

"Yes sir, anything for you ma'am?"

"I'll have a vodka with Ginger Ale, another blanket, and two aspirin."

"Right away." As the flight attendant turned to leave, Dan was staring at her legs.

"What do you think happened to her?"

I leaned over the aisle to take a look at what Dan was talking about and noted the large, crescent shaped scar covering her calf. "I don't know, shark bite?"

Dan laughed for a minute and then pushed his call button. Another flight attendant was immediately at his side. "I've been sitting here for forty-five seconds! Where's my booze!?" The flight attendant apologized and then scurried away.

"Jesus Dan, do you have to be such an asshole?"

"I never get to fly first class, I'm getting my money's worth."

"It's not your money."

"No matter."

The flight attendant arrived with our requests. I chased the aspirin down with the vodka Ginger Ale. I held my breath as we took off. Before we stopped ascending, I was already done

with my drink.

“Hey! Get mi Amiga another vodka Ginger Ale!”

“You know, Dan, I can order my own drinks,” I didn’t really want another drink until it arrived seconds later.

I took a sip and then nestled back into my oversize, first class seat. I thought about all the poor saps back in coach with their knees up against the seat. I thought about how every single time I’d ever flown, I had to walk through first class and watch the rich fucks get served mimosas and little hot towelettes. I thought about how angry it made me to be squished in economy class with the sniveling fat guy on my left and the redneck kid blasting country music from his headphones on my right. That kid should have been deaf, I could understand every lyric. I thought about that one time in particular when there were two babies on the plane, and neither one of them liked flying very much. They cried and cried, and I remember having really mean, unnatural kinds of thoughts. I felt bad about it immediately afterwards, but the thoughts were there. That was the same transatlantic flight when the old guy sitting behind me coughed on my hair all night long.

I took another sip of the vodka and then smiled to myself. “Suckers,” I thought.

“So, uh, that was fun the other night,” Dan was starting to settle in.

“What the drunk fucking or the psychotic rampage that came before it?”

“Both, that was just fun. You don’t, uh, you aren’t...”

“Dan, we both had drunk sex, I’m sure it was good in the moment, but we should probably just forget about it before I throw up.”

“I was thinking exactly the same thing. Not that you weren’t great or anything it’s just...”

“Trust me, I know. Let’s pretend it never happened.”

“Deal. We can still be friends though, right?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, are you serious?”

“Good, that’s what I thought.”

I covered myself up and went to sleep. I didn’t awake for the entire flight. When we landed, Dan punched me to wake me up.

“I’ve never seen anyone sleep like that. I could have had my way with you and you never would have noticed.”

“You know, I could file sexual harassment charges on you,” I said.

“Yeah, but you won’t. I know you’re a sick fuck, even if you are a girl.”

I swallowed as I closed my eyes. I’d never had that kind of pain in my throat before, and I’d always been prone to getting strep. It was as if jagged teeth were sawing through my trachea, as if my esophagus was being cleaned with a steel scouring pad. The breathing was starting to get tight, and I fantasized about not waking up again.

In the airport, I was feeling dizzy. I just wanted to sleep some more, even though I’d been sleeping much of the last several days. The flight was direct, but still nineteen hours. I had slept through all of it. At the baggage carousel, I gathered my bags, told Dan I’d see him later, and then grabbed a taxi. When I got home, I threw my bags on the floor. I popped another two aspirin and then went to sleep. It was too late in the day to go see my doctor anyway. His walk-in hours are only until nine-thirty on Sundays. I don’t know why he has hours on

Sundays at all.

I woke up at ten-thirty. “Goddamnit!” I said out loud. My doctor’s office wasn’t far away, but I’d just slept another nineteen hours. The thing on my neck was now the size of a baseball, regulation size. I skipped the shower after seeing the abscess. I just threw on some clothes and headed towards the doctor.

When I arrived, the waiting room was full. I waited at the reception desk behind two other patients. I was feeling impatient, but also too sick to cause a fuss.

“I need your chip card,” the nurse said without looking away from her computer screen. I handed her the card. “What can we help you with today?” She still wasn’t looking at me.

“Uh, I don’t think I can wait,” I said.

“We’re going as fast as we can,” the fucking bitch still wasn’t looking at me.

“No, really, look at me – I don’t think I can wait.” With an audible and annoyed sigh, she finally looked up. Her annoyance gave way to horror as her eyes scanned the abscess, red and pulsating, on the side of my neck. She trembled as she reached for the phone.

“Doctor Ratowski, we have an emergency. I’m not sure, it could be. I don’t know. No,” she hung up the phone. “Go through that door,” she pointed down the hallway. When I got to the door, I knocked. In the seven seconds it took for the doctor to say “Come in,” in a thick Russian accent, I thought about all the seniors in the waiting room. Just sitting there, waiting to die while some jerk with a leather jacket on came in and cut ahead of all the wait time. I seriously doubt they sat there thinking, “Oh, she must really be sick!” I wonder if they even noticed, the clock above the doorway wasn’t moving anyway, they were probably just dazed out, old people.

I walked into the tiny office and sat down. The doctor was fairly young. I looked around for a second and noticed that there was absolutely nothing in the room. There was a desk with a single pad of Post-It notes, a telephone, a computer monitor, a printer, two pens, and one of those really big desk calendars, which was completely blank. On the wall was token hotel art of a dew drop, and there were six fat medical books on the bookshelf. Other than that, there was nothing. No trashcan, no coat rack, no personal items of any kind.

“We need to take a look down your throat,” he announced as his eyes fell on the baseball attached to my neck. I stood up, and he grabbed a tongue depressor from his drawer.

“Ahhh...” I said.

“Don’t say ‘ahh,’” the doctor said patiently. He looked down there for a long time as I stared at a tiny water stain on the ceiling.

“Ok. Why didn’t you come to see me sooner?”

“I just got back in the States yesterday. I was in Bangkok on business, and I didn’t want to see a doctor there.”

“How long have you been experiencing symptoms?” He was leaning back in his big leather chair, writing in a leather bound book.

“I don’t know. About four days, I guess.” I was trying to remember Bangkok. I’d been drunk. I had no idea how long I slept or how long it took us to get back to the States. I was still trying to calculate however many days it had been when the doctor said,

“Well, it looks like one serious abscess,” he picked up the phone. “We’re going to have to get you to a hospital right away. It has to be cut open so that you don’t lose your ability to breathe.” There was a hospital next door, I figured I could just wander over. The doctor garbled doctor-speak into the phone and then hung up.

“So I can just head over to the emergency room, or what?” His impersonal office was starting to get to me, and I didn’t like the idea of having surgery.

Besides, I love my job, and even though I’ve been feeling inconsequential lately, I didn’t want to miss two weeks of work.

“You’re going to need to go to the hospital over in Harron. They have the best ear, nose, and throat specialists in the state. Do you have someone to take you, or should I call an ambulance? You need to go right away.”

“It’s alright, I live a few blocks away. I’ll make it there.”

“You need to go right away,” the doctor was looking me right in the eye.

“Yeah. I got it. Thanks.” With that I stood up and left the office. I didn’t even pay attention to the geezers on the way out.

Of course I didn’t rush home, hop in the car, and drive straight to the hospital. I figured they would have forced me into an ambulance if I *really* had to go “right away”. I meandered home. Then I poured myself a drink. This sort of situation called for Tequila. After three shots, the abscess was the backdraft of the fire in my throat, and I was ready to turn myself in to the hospital.

CHAPTER TWO

My roommate won't stop talking to me. It's just after noon, and I am plotting my escape. I'm still swallowing thick, gooey scabs, but I feel much better. My roommate is blathering on and on about how she met her husband, where they've been on vacation, and other various tidbits of her boring life. I lay back in my bed and close my eyes. Miraculously, she shuts up. I'm not really tired anymore, I just want to leave here. I'm not allowed to use my cell phone, and I'm bored.

I'd called Dan two days ago, right before my throat started bleeding. He said he would come by, but he hadn't shown up yet. I suspected that he would show up any minute and tell my roommate she was hot.

The nurse came in to check my roomie's bandages. They started talking about my roomie's boring life while I lay there grinding my teeth. I am about to go bat shit crazy. I get up from the bed and go into the hallway. I'm going to try Dan again.

The phone rings, but Dan doesn't pick up. I realize that I am going to have to escape the hospital all by myself. I walk slowly down the hallway towards the door. Outside is the hospital park. It's a giant courtyard, surrounded by the hospital buildings, that is so manicured it's thirty steps removed from nature. Every plant looks as if it's plastic. For a moment, I wish they really were plastic so that I can come back later, douse them in gasoline, set them on fire, and smell the molten lava that results. It would be glorious to watch a field full of malleable plants melting into the cobblestone walkway.

I scoot back into my room and lay down again. I'm not going to walk out of the hospital during the afternoon for fear of being dragged back in and strapped down against my will.

At five dinner is served. My meal is a bowl of white slop. Not only does it look like a thousand men ejaculated into the bowl, it tastes salty. There are no other flavors. The consistency was fun to play with. I let spoonful after spoonful slosh back into the bowl. The sound is delightful. My roommate was allowed to eat goulash, which was slightly gray in color.

There's no television in the room. The only magazine I have to flip through is a Us Weekly June from work had brought with her. I'm under the impression she brought it just to piss me off. She can't possibly be stupid enough to think that I want to read about celebrity hard ons and look at pictures of their kids.

June Kim is a little Asian chick with a mediocre flat face and double D boobs. She'd gotten a boob job just a year ago, and I had wondered since that time how it is that she is actually able to stand. I theorized that she wears one of those mover's back brace things all the

time. June always wore expensive shoes. Not just kind of expensive shoes, but the kind you see in those stores that have exactly three pairs of shoes in a four thousand square foot space. Once I walked into one of those stores. I was wearing a hoodie and jeans. I didn't look that grungy, but I didn't look like the tailored suits observing the nothing. I even had a bunch of money and briefly considered blowing it on the handbag sitting on a pedestal in the middle of the room. As I reached out to touch the bag, a woman grabbed my wrist and said, "I'm sorry, but I think maybe you should leave."

"Excuse me!?! Are you fucking serious!?"

"Yes I am, you can't afford anything here."

I pulled a huge wad of hundreds out of my pocket, forty-five hundred dollars I had just taken out of the perks box at work to deliver to the bank. "Oh no? You sure?"

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry!" I'd of thought the smile plastered on her face was genuine if I hadn't seen it forming seconds earlier.

"Fuck you, bitch," and I took my wad of cash and walked out.

June is always put together. She isn't beautiful, but she has the personality of a minx. She oozes sex, but only around those people that can directly influence her status in life. She has a different boyfriend every other month, and they are all well-to-do. Whenever one of her boyfriends gives her an expensive gift, she comes to work and struts around showing off her cashmere scarf, diamond tennis bracelet, or whatever she was given.

June is constantly getting on my case about something. She competes with me when there's no competition to be had. She talks over me in meetings, and she dumps out the coffee at three in the afternoon even though she knows that Dan and I drink coffee in the afternoon.

I look at the cover of the magazine and lay back in bed again. I'm so bored. The best thing to do is sleep for a while. I know the nurses come in around one-thirty to check on us. They're not at all quiet about it, and it's woken me up every night since I've been here. Afterwards, they disappear into the nurses lounge for an hour. I'll be heading out then.

While I'm sinking into the darkness, I have a flashback of Bangkok. Dan and I are leaving the place we were at after the Blue Elephant and some guy blows dust at me. This little Indian guy walks right up to me on the street and blows dust in my face. Then he smiles and just walks away. I remember Dan laughing and saying, "If you get high, I'm going to lick out your nostrils."

The memory sends a cold shiver up my spine, mainly because I had slept with that dumb asshole. Even drunk it's kind of inexcusable, he's so crass and internally maimed. It's as if someone went into his brain and created gray matter where 'tact' was supposed to be. I didn't find him attractive even in the slightest. In fact, I found him downright horrifying. Dan made me laugh quite a bit, but a lot of the time he also made me nauseous.

Before I allow myself to sink into a darkness full of nightmares at the memories of Dan and Bangkok, I think about Eric, the guy from my office. I don't know why he pops into my thoughts, he just kind of does. He relaxes me somehow. His presence makes me feel less alone. I stop mulling it all over and fall asleep.

The dental hygienist knocks over the instrument tray while mounting a patient. The patient is happy to be mounted, and I am the hygienist. As the dentist's tools clatter to the floor, I see nurses opening the door.

Suddenly I'm awake, startled out of sleep by the nurses' one thirty in the morning checkup. I quickly close my eyes again. One nurse leans in to my roommate, and the other observes me. I keep my eyes closed and try to breathe steadily. Two plastic cups, one with a suppository and one with a single little white pill are placed on my nightstand. Two seconds later, they're done pretending to do their jobs, and they chit-chat out of the room.

I swing my legs around the side of the bed and place my feet on the floor. The floor feels like someone wrapped it in plastic wrap. It's not exactly sticky, but sticky somehow. Lifting my toes from the floor sounds like peeling tape off of a refrigerator. I grab the cup with the little white pill and put it into my mouth. This is my eight am painkiller. They give me the strongest painkiller in the morning because I've been without any painkillers all night, and the morning just sucks. I briefly consider trying to steal more pain pills from the nurses station on my way out, but smartly decide against it. I can get painkillers from Dan, I'm sure.

My clothes are sitting to my right, on a chair next to the table all the stupid "Get Well" cards are on. I stand up and get dressed, the adrenaline is already pumping. The doctors want me to stay, and I am leaving. It's not a legal issue. Yet.

After I dress myself, I creep to the door and take a look left down the hallway. The nurses have just left the last patient and are headed in the direction of their little hospital squatter pad. I bet they had all kinds of fun stuff in there. Pinball machines and intravenous drugs, for example. As the door closes behind them, I slip into the hallway and make my way to the door. I stay on the wall as I open the door, but the stair light comes on anyway. It isn't really needed, the lantern from the street lights up the stairwell like a carnival.

When I get down the stairs and head outside, I'm met with warm, soft air. It's a beautiful evening for an escape. I figure I can just go home. I hadn't used my current address on the hospital forms, and my new place wasn't in my name. Besides, it's a hospital, not a prison, so I'm not really "escaping", I'm just leaving against doctors orders in the middle of the night.

I cross the courtyard and head out through the main entrance, left of the entryway I am standing in. My intentions are to go home for a couple of days and just rest. Out on the street I catch a cab.

When I get home, there's dead flowers in a vase on my porch. The water is murky and kind of clumpy. The card stuck in the flowers is no longer legible. I leave them there, pretending like they're not for me. Who knows, maybe they're for one of the other tenants.

As I crawl into my bed at three in the morning, I realize that tomorrow I won't have to eat shitty hospital food. This thought alone carries me into sleep.

The phone is ringing. The clock says it's eleven in the morning. I rub my eyes and listen to the phone ringing. Finally, my answering machine picks up. A monotone voice says,

"Hello. This message is for Maggie Lawson. This is the Harron Medical Center calling. We need you to return to the hospital right away. Please give us a call back at 1-800-427-7661, or simply return to the surgical wing."

The answering machine beeps off as I'm putting on my robe. In the kitchen, there's

enough coffee for a single cup and some stale crackers. Everything else in the refrigerator is rotting. I haven't been home in six days.

After making myself the coffee, I decide to take a nice long bath after which I will watch television all day long.

When I get around to switching on the television, I make a point to skip over the daytime talk shows. For a while, I watch cartoons. At lunchtime, I order Pad Thai from my favorite delivery Thai place, which also happens to be the only Thai place that will deliver to my neighborhood. I order a triple order so that I won't have to worry about what I'm going to eat for dinner or the next morning. In the afternoon, I watch a variety of nature documentaries.

At four I decide to catch up on the news.

...If you're just tuning in, we're at the Harron Medical Center where tragedy has struck over the last two days. A surgeon and his surgical team are dead. A floor nurse has been quarantined. Details are still coming in, but we're talking to Harron's Press Secretary, Herman Sithe.

"Mr. Sithe, can you tell us what happened?"

"It's our great displeasure to announce that four of our staff have died in the past two days. All four were afflicted with a sickness we haven't seen before. We have quarantined a nurse whom we believe is also infected."

"How does this 'sickness' present itself? Where did it come from?"

"These staff members presented flu-like symptoms two days ago. At first, we thought it was just a bug. However, the five staff members showed symptoms not associated with a common flu."

"Could you give us an idea of what those symptoms were?"

"The staff members showed a slowed response time and slight skin discoloration. One of our floor nurses has been quarantined pending further investigations."

"Are there any other symptoms?"

"I'm sorry, we're not able to comment further at this time."

"Have funeral arrangements been made for the four staff members who died?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that at this time. Donations in their honor are being accepted by Harron Medical Center. Thank you very much."

Harron Medical Center is accepting donations at any of the hospitals reception desks. We'll keep you posted on the developments of this peculiar story.

I recognize the floor nurse's picture. It's the same nurse that asked me why I didn't use my call button. I recognize the surgeon as well, he was my surgeon. I don't recognize the other three staff members, and I don't understand why the report referred to "a sickness". What was that supposed to mean? It's completely unspecific. When did they get sick? How did they get sick? Are other people in the hospital sick? Have I been exposed to something? The "skin discoloration" factor kind of bothers me too. I imagine five blue hospital employees in pink scrubs. The image makes me laugh.

I spend the rest of the day watching cartoons and checking back to see if any new developments are reported. The story doesn't come up again. I don't call the hospital, and I don't go outside. I keep thinking about whether or not I could have caught something at the hospital. Is that why they're calling me? Do I only have a couple days to live? If that's the case, I'd really like to know as soon as possible. I wouldn't want to waste my last day doing

chores or renewing my driver's license. I want information on the news report, and I know how to get it. Onyx has a wide network. A very wide network.

I call Dan.

"Hey, I need you to do me a favor."

"Well, hello to you too! Where the fuck have you been?"

"I was in the hospital! I called you from there, you said you were going to come by!"

"I did? What day was that?"

"Three days ago."

"Oh, well I'll come tomorrow."

"I'm not in the hospital anymore...listen, I need a favor."

"You know, you can't call me and expect me to remember that I am supposed to do things. That's what email is for. I need a written record of my appointments."

"Well, sorry, but I thought that my being in the hospital would be something you might remember!"

"Apparently not. Anyway, you aren't there anymore, so everything is all better?" I tell Dan about the surgery, the biopsy, and my escape. "Oh shit! Yeah, that thing on your throat did look pretty gross. So, you left the hospital, why?"

"Because it fucking sucked. I was bored and they were poking me..."

"And now they've left you a message?"

"Yes. Did you see the news report on Harron Medical Center?"

"No," Dan sighs really loudly, and I realize that his short attention span has neared its end.

"Ok well some people are dead, it's strange, I need you to get some people at Onyx to look into it for me." I want to tell Dan more, but I know him too well. He's bored at the moment and probably needs a drink. He'd be more interested in my story if it included topless women and a pogo stick.

"What the hell are you calling me for? You can't call me for information, I don't know shit. You need to call management."

"Are you saying you won't help me?"

"Listen, Maggie, I'd help you if I could, but if you want any kind of inside information, you're going to have to call Eric."

"Alright, I'll call you later."

"Okey Dokey Smokey, have a good 'un." I hang up the phone. Should I call Eric right now? I mean, I want information, but what if I'm just having some sort of medication induced paranoia attack? I'm actually feeling better than I have in a week. I decide not to call Eric or anyone else at Onyx just yet and get more Pad Thai out of the fridge. As I eat the cold noodles, I take a look at my calendar. If I'm not dying, I'm here for four weeks, then I'm supposed to go to DC and crash some political fundraiser. I'm not in the mood to think about it though, so I leave the dossier unopened in my email.

I get into bed at nine thirty. Right up until I got sick, I was more of a night person. I used to go to bed around two or three in the morning, then head into work around ten or eleven. Onyx doesn't have to set schedules. Everyone who works for Onyx is working twenty-four

hours a day anyway. We're perpetuating a movement, movements don't have closing times. Tomorrow I should show up at the office. No one will notice if I don't, but I've decided that I want to talk to Eric face-to-face if I'm going to ask him for a favor.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, as I get dressed, I turn on the news. Harron Medical Center is back in the headlines.

Another death at Harron Medical Center early this morning, when a mortician was brutally murdered by an unidentified assailant. The assailant attacked Doctor Rodney Paul around three in the morning. Upon hearing screams, two orderlies ran to the scene. The orderlies have said that the assailant turned on them. One of the orderlies issued a sharp blow to the assailant's head, causing instant death. The assailant has yet to be identified, and the orderly has not been taken into custody. The authorities have called the act an accidental killing. We'll keep you posted on this developing story.

I switch off the television, annoyed that they didn't mention the surgeon and his team or the quarantined nurse. I'm still wondering if I might be sick. I try to forget about it by reminding myself that I feel great. My throat feels and tastes like there's a rotten egg dying in it, and I try to determine if my breath smells as bad as the back of my throat tastes. I conclude that it doesn't.

On the way to the office, I stop by a cupcake shop and buy some gourmet cupcakes. I figure if I'm going to ask for a favor, I should probably bring a bribe. I know I don't need to bribe them, Eric and Jacob think I'm awesome, but I wanted a cupcake anyway. The cupcakes here are absolutely breathtaking. They cost entirely too much, but I don't care about the money. They're delicious and well worth the money. The other great thing about this cupcake shop is that it's next door to one of those fat people Jazzercise classes. When you walk outside with your cupcakes, you get to see the misery on the faces of those poor, fat women who are living in a twisted skinny world. It's not that I don't feel bad for them. I definitely do. It's just that seeing misery is the thing that reminds me not to be miserable.

I don't bother locking up my bike when I get to Onyx. No one steals anything off the Onyx lot. It has something to do with the fact that the Onyx building is about as ominous as a building can possibly be. Every time I look up at the giant black trapezoid that serves as our office, I imagine hordes of mad scientists and evil geniuses crafting the next generation of robotic super soldiers and mutualist biogenetic weaponry. The behemoth building towers above the nothingness around it. I look around for Dan's car, but don't see it. That's not saying much as the Onyx parking lot is roughly two football fields big and is filled with "decoy" cars.

No one enters the Onyx building other than employees, each of whom has been carefully vetted in a process that rivals even the most sophisticated government background check. Although there are a plethora of organizations with which Onyx has long standing and

trustworthy relationships, no one from any of them has ever been inside the building that I'm standing outside of. In fact, there are only thirty-seven people who have been in the building since it was built. Three of them are dead.

The funny thing is, there's absolutely nothing special about the Onyx offices. It's a little nicer than your typical customer service center, but it's just an office. When you enter the building there is a large, circular lobby with corridors shooting off into various directions. The lobby has enclaves housing three restaurants. The food is fantastic, and all three of the restaurants are staffed by a mere ten people. Those same ten people do office cleanup and man the reception desk. The reception desk, however, does not need manning because in order to enter the building you have to have a badge, a retinal scan, and pass a series of tests designed specifically for whomever it is that you are supposed to be. There's no one else on the planet that can complete my tests, they are complicated and specific, and they change every day. These tests are the result of a ten month observation period in which an Onyx employee is cybernetically dissected and cataloged using a super computer called Mnemonic. It basically looks into your memory and catalogues every choice you've ever made. The tests are simply combinations of those choices, only your individual subconscious will interpret appropriate solutions in the right sequence.

The entrance security is just for shits-and-giggles. Onyx is useless without its people. If one were to bypass entrance security in some way, they would find themselves in an office with nothing to steal. Every scrap of paper, every disc of data is protected by weird minds games that only Onyx employees have a chance at understanding. Every hard drive and pencil shaving is watched over. Like I said, we're vetted.

The circular lobby I'm now standing in is completely empty. There's no one in the restaurants. There's scooters and skateboards lined up next to a replica of Rodin's the Thinker. I have respect for that particular sculpture, I'd even say I like it. However, I have already voiced my disappointment that something a little more creative wasn't used in its place. My complaint is scheduled to be discussed in next month's meeting.

I grab a skateboard and head into the corridor at the western side of the circle. The long straight wall stretches in front of me as I skate to the elevators. The elevators also have a security mechanism, it is not really secure. We call it "Fear". Each of the three elevators appears to hover above a sinking pit of darkness. When one tries to step into the elevator it falls abruptly. If you make any noise at all, the elevator will continue to fall. We've had some interesting incidents occur when people were too drunk from office Sangria to shut the fuck up. The elevators are on a sort of super strength fishing line. They don't fall to the bottom of the pit. They stop just before crashing and go into a lock down mode. God help you if no one knows you're on one of them, and you don't have a communication device.

Onyx employees always carry an Onyx smartphone. Mainly because of the elevator thing, but also because our phones are connected to an entire world of information and not just what you can find on the Internet. With access to any computer, Onyx smartphones are actually smart.

I step into the elevator and wait for the drop to slow. I don't make a sound, and the elevator only falls a couple of meters before allowing me to select a floor. Although there's

very few employees at Onyx, there is a lot of space. Labs fill up the majority of the building. I go to the eleventh floor where Jacob and Eric share a six thousand square meter space. The eleventh floor is also where most of the activity is. The command and control center is a bunch of computers that no one ever uses and a giant conference table. Most of the time, if you're in the office, you're sitting at that table.

I wonder which of my colleagues are in the office today.

When I get upstairs, I go to my office and set the cupcakes on my desk. Then I skate to the conference room where everyone is sitting. Jacob, Eric, Dan, and June are immersed in a pile of papers.

"Hey," I say after a full five minutes of standing in the doorway. I'd been watching Eric. Eric is always well put together. He pays attention to himself, but succeeds in looking relaxed. His clothes are tailored, and he chooses colors that match his dark hair and light eyes. He's the type of person that never has a five o'clock shadow, but can still look a little punk. His hair is always out of place.

"Oh, Maggie! How long have you been standing there!? How are you? Are you ok?" Jacob is obviously manic, but genuinely concerned for my wellbeing. He's already stood up and rounded the table to give me a hug.

"I'm ok. Just thought I should come in for a bit," Eric raises an eyebrow at me.

Jacob voices Eric's thoughts, "Are you fucking stupid, you should be resting!"

"Actually, I know. But I need to talk to you guys," I look Eric in the eye, and Jacob moves towards the door.

"Well alright, Maggie, let's go into my office." The three of us head towards the door. I catch Dan's eye and give him a signal that we'll get a drink later. We have to walk a good twenty meters before we reach Jacob's office, as we pass mine, I duck in.

"I just have to grab something, I'll catch up." I was desperate for the cupcake I had bought myself. My blood sugar was low. Plus, those cupcakes are my bribe.

Jacob's office is huge. He has a foosball table and a sitting area along with bookshelves and a desk. His bookshelves are filled with books like "Steal this Book", "An Anarchist's Cookbook", and "Breakfast of Champions". He has every essay Hunter S. Thompson ever wrote and a couple of random classics. On the opposite side of the room he has his "Wall of the Game" – a massive multiplayer, multi-platform, multiscreen gaming system with speakers so loud, they could literally blow your clothes off. I stopped wearing skirts to work about three days after I started. He also has several computers strewn about in the room. We arrange ourselves in three of the five armchairs.

"Cupcake?" I set the box on the table and take the one with maple frosting and a walnut.

"You do so like to spread the joy and happiness, don't you?" I've already got icing on my face as Jacob reaches into the box. Eric smiles at me shoving the rest of the cupcake in my mouth.

"So what's up?" He asks at the pinnacle of my cupcake frenzy. I roll my eyes at him and chew very slowly while watching his smile grow into a grin.

"Well, did you guys happen to see the Harron Medical Center in the news this morning?" I say after swallowing. I can tell by the suddenly serious look on Eric's face, he was also a little

disturbed by the report. Jacob looked clueless.

“Yeah,” Eric says. “Crazy, right? First a quarantine and now a murder.” I didn’t think about Eric hearing yesterday’s report. I’d been watching the local news channel, it stands to reason that there was an article in the paper. Eric reads the paper at his desk every morning. He also has an obsessive compulsion disorder. It’s not a full blown OCD, but there are certain things that he does that are a little over the top. I feel like I don’t know him very well though, so I am constantly wondering if his neatness and attention to detail (even details that are not particularly worth remembering) is just something he does at work.

“A quarantine? Murder? Over at Harron? I had my appendix taken out there.” Jacob is catching up.

“Well, I had my tonsils taken out there last week, and I’m a little worried that I might be sick.” Eric sits forward in his seat, his serious look becomes a little darker.

“Now why would you think that exactly?” I think Eric can answer his own question, he’s bright like that – good at connecting dots.

“The surgeon and his team are the one’s that did my procedure, and the quarantined nurse...well, I recognized her too.”

“Don’t be coy.” I hate it when Eric does that. He always seems to know when I’m holding something back.

“Yeah, how do you know the nurse?”

“Last Friday I coughed up a couple pints of blood on her.”

“On her?” Jacob was nearly laughing.

“Ok, not ON her, but she assisted in the cleanup.” I look at Eric, and his expression hasn’t changed. I decide to lay it out as succinctly as possible. I don’t have time for games, and Jacob and Eric will know what to do. They’ll know exactly what I’m after. “I had direct physical contact with all of the people who have died or are dying from this ‘sickness’. I feel fine, but maybe they felt fine too, until they were dead. I want to look into it. I want access to the grid.”

“Grid Access, eh?” Eric is smiling again. Whenever we invoked our network connections to do us any sort of recon mission, we termed it “Grid Access”. It’s a little office joke that strokes God complexes and motivates the troops.

Jacob smiles loudly and stands up. “Give her what she needs,” he says to Eric. “We don’t want any of our own living in fear. Keep me posted on what you find. Don’t worry about it, Maggie – Eric knows what to do. I’ve got to get back to June before Dan kills her.”

Jacob walks out of the room, and the air changes instantly.

“Have you really been feeling ok?” Eric’s concern delights me. Over the last couple of months we’ve had a variety of interactions that I wouldn’t deem as strictly professional. Nothing overbearing, but we’ve exchanged tidbits of personal information – likes, habits, things that annoy us, and we do a fair amount of verbal jousting. When I’m traveling, we check in weekly for a briefing. The briefings have been getting steadily longer. Even when we’re in the office, we send each other random messages to break up the day. I look forward to them. There’s definitely chemistry there, but he always seems ever so slightly unsure. He hasn’t made a move, and I’m not pushing the issue. His current concern is genuine, there’s no

lightheartedness behind it. That scares me a little.

"I'm fine. Just a little freaked out. I've done the standard searches. I looked into the hospital PR files, and police records. Those people are either getting better at hiding their digital artifacts, or they're not writing anything down. It's just strange."

"Alright, let's go to my office and see what's in the Rolodex." Eric grabs a laptop and hands it to me. He makes no effort to go to his actual office. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm taking the 46-Book."

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead, take the best laptop in the office for yourself. It's fine."

"Thanks."

"Jerk."

"Now, now, you just asked me for a favor."

"One you want to do."

"You're right. I don't want to fight with you, I'm helpy," Eric is smiling again and typing quickly on the 46. "You know, if you asked me to, I'd do just about anything for you." I don't respond. I don't know what to say to that. I'm just watching him and wondering why exactly I have a laptop in my hands. "Ok. We've got a security guard at Harron that owes us a favor after we erased his unfortunate experimentation with PCP and the nakedness that it caused."

"I guess we could start there."

"That was so full of agreement and enthusiasm, I very nearly dropped this expensive machine." The unbridled sarcasm irritates and entertains me at the same time. I remain serious.

"Look, my surgery was Tuesday. The doctors bit the dust yesterday. Best case scenario, I've got five days to figure out if I'm wasting five days figuring it out. Maybe I should just not bother. If I'm dying, I'm dying. I'm not going to find out about it and find a cure in five days." Melancholy was starting to set in. I didn't want to pretend like I wasn't scared shitless about dropping dead in five days. I was pretty happy in my life for a person that is completely unable to be happy. I have work I care about, friends to get drunk with, and I make enough money to fly off at any random time and just see some stuff. There are things that are missing for me, but I am content.

"Alright, we'll find someone else. Don't worry, we'll work it out, today." His voice was soft, and I know he is just as worried about it as I am. He continues surfing through the Onyx network, and I take another cupcake. After ten minutes, Eric looks up at me and smiles, "I've found her."

"Who?"

"Bethany Fordson." I wait for him to clarify his selection and his plan. "Bethany is a member of the janitorial staff at Harron Medical Center. Last year, she participated in a random rally. She met with some of our people, and showed an aptitude for secrecy."

"Are we just going to call her up and ask her to risk her job by collecting information for us?"

"No. We're going to go see her and ask her to risk her job by collecting information for us, and we're going to pay her." I'm immediately surprised by Eric's matter-of-fact tone. Onyx is a company, not like any other, but a legitimate company. We have accounting records and

contracts, development strategies and business processes. Paying an informant for information is on the list of our expenses, but we don't generally pay people for information to quell curiosity. Our informants are connected to projects, projects are connected to clients, and clients have budgets.

"How are we going to justify a payment for information not regarding any of our projects?"

"I have access to the cash, why don't you let me worry about cooking the books?"

"That's exactly my problem. I don't want you to have to worry about the accounting because of my curiosity." Eric looks at me for a moment. A long moment. Then he sets his laptop aside and takes mine from my lap. He takes my hands.

"You are not curious. You're scared, and so am I."

"Ok, I'm scared, I admit it. But what does that have to do with you?"

"I've been completely preoccupied with thoughts of you the last few months. I can't stop thinking about you. There are things I want to talk about with you. Things I want to do with you. Things I want to do to you. Moments I want to have," he's still holding my hands. "I want you. All of you."

"You don't even know me!"

"I know you a little. I want to know more. I want to know everything. I'm going to help you figure out what Harron is hiding anyway, but I need to know if I'm imagining the chemistry I feel between us. If you don't feel it...I just need to know."

I don't say anything. I let the seconds go by. He's waiting for me to respond, waiting for me to say anything at all, and I'm just staring at him. He starts to look a little embarrassed, uncomfortable. He looks away.

"Well, I guess..." he's about to say that he guesses I don't feel the same way, but I interrupt him by leaning forward and kissing him. He immediately places his hand at the back of my neck and pulls me towards him. The kiss tells him everything he needed to know, and when I pull away again, he pulls me back. Then he looks me in the eye before saying,

"So that's what a tonsillectomy tastes like." I feel my face turning bright red, I sit back quickly.

"Oh my god. Jesus." I feel completely disgusting, embarrassed, and ashamed, but Eric is smiling at me. He stands up, then leans down and kisses me again.

"It's that kind of gross that makes me want more. Let's get to work."

"I don't fucking care if Scott Spencer is begging for an audience to show off his fucking contact lenses. We're not getting involved with those douchebags, even on a superficial level." Jacob isn't exactly yelling at June, but she looks distraught. She's obviously been pushing the meeting for the last few minutes.

Eric and I have just entered the conference room.

"Oh, that reminds me," I say to Eric, "in Bangkok, I found Scott Spencer and told him how fantastic you are. Dan and I had a nice little exchange with him."

"Did he run off and pout?"

"Yeah, right after he called you a dumbass."

“Awesome. I influence people.”

June’s job is to keep up the Onyx charade. It’s her job to make sure everyone still believes that Onyx is doing technology research. She does this in a variety of ways, one of which is setting up meetings to have a back and forth with competitors in the field. Our knowledge bank and network connections are extensive enough that June has original data to present whenever she needs it. She also goes to conferences and meet-ups in the field and talks to people about projects that don’t exist. She is still trying to convince Jacob that if Onyx is to maintain its public image, they need to show interest in the augmented reality research Scott Spencer’s company is doing.

“InterVision has taken steps beyond what the other players are doing. Everyone is clamoring to get into that meeting, and Scott Spencer called me personally to invite representatives from Onyx.”

“Why did he call you?” Dan asks.

“Well, um, we had a drink together at last years OSCON. He likes me.”

“He likes your...” Dan cuts himself off, and I laugh.

“What!? Go ahead, say it! See if I don’t slap you!” Despite her fascination with her own reflection, June isn’t a stupid person. She’s manipulative, confident, and intelligent. If she wasn’t such a bitch, we could be friends. June has, however, reserved judgement on everyone in the office except for Jacob and Eric. Her flirtatious attitude around them is a signal of her utmost respect and her desire to get either one of them into a more horizontal position.

“Alright children,” Jacob chimes in. “Here’s the deal: June, you can go to the meeting at InterVision that ‘everyone is clamoring to get into’, but that’s it. No press releases, no on-the-record comments about how Onyx is interested in InterVision’s solutions. I don’t want to see anything more than ‘A representative from Onyx was in attendance’ in any paper, periodical, blog, website, magazine, or other form of communication. Got it?”

“Yes, but one article with...”

“No damnit! No articles, don’t be overly public. I don’t want Onyx associated with InterVision’s research in a few months when Scott Spencer and his board of cronies screw the pooch and announce that their fucking contact lenses burn holes in your eyes. Stay away from them, we don’t need that cover.”

June slinks out of the conference room and into her office. She’ll follow orders, she’s part of Onyx, but I can see that she doesn’t agree with Jacob’s assessment of the future.

“I like sparring with June, but I’m fucking sick and tired of talking about Scott ‘Douchebag’ Spencer,” Jacob says to us. “So what’s the plan?” He whispers the question.

“Oh, we can talk in front of Dan,” I say, and Dan looks up from his rubberband ball. “I asked him for help first.”

“I totally told her that I am a useless sack of shit and that she had to come to you guys.”

Eric and Jacob smile, and the four of us sit down. Dan shoves the InterVision research onto the floor, and Jacob pats him on the back for it.

“We’re going to head over to Chestnut Avenue and talk to a Ms. Bethany Fordson. She’s a janitor at Harron. I’m taking a cashbox. I will pay her whatever she wants.”

“How do we know her? And why aren’t you asking me permission to ‘pay her what she

wants’?” Jacob is still smiling.

“She’s been catalogued as SA, and I don’t need your permission to do my job,” Eric has never taken Jacob’s shit. His arrogance is intoxicating, but also rightly placed. He knows that he’s good, and he let’s other people know it too. It’s one of the things I like about him.

“Can I come?” Dan asks.

“No.” Eric and I say in unison.

“Fine, fuck you guys then,” Dan feigns hurt, but he doesn’t really care.