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## The Wrightly Crumple

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*Bard College*

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The Wrightly Crumple

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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*Prologue: The Box*

She stood crouched inside a tiny wooden box waiting to die. It was a musty contraption, controlled by a complicated system of pulleys and ropes. Stan, McCreedy's assistant, operated the machine. He was up there in the wings, watching for the signal to start pulling. When McCreedy, the director, gave him two thumbs up, Stan would get to work and the box would rise through the hole in the stage built especially for this purpose. It would deposit her on her mark, the staging engineered so that she would appear as if out of thin air. And the spotlight would be hers.

She could hear snippets of dialogue from above, mostly words with hard sounds-- *c, k, t, g*. She hadn't realized how often the words *croquet* and *torpedo* were used in the script. Also *cancer*, although it trickled down to her as *can, can, can, can*. She hoped it was a good sign. This was undoubtedly her best entrance to date, but not the one she would have chosen. She preferred what she was used to, walk-on deaths. Those were quick, simple: stand in the wings, move to her mark on cue, no further directions needed. All they entailed was a quick twenty minute call, walk on, die, change costume, arrive at another show an hour later, walk on, die. She could do three, four deaths a night. There was none of this endless waiting.

A tiny spider had been dangling in front of her nose. Now it began its graceful journey upwards towards the thin roof, if she could even call it a roof. It was a wood panel capable of sliding to the side when she needed to exit. It creaked loudly every time they'd rehearsed it, engendering in her an overwhelming feeling of distrust. McCreedy *had* to have cut corners building the thing; he never had enough money to do what he wanted, and this...no director had enough money for this. And she didn't trust Stan, with



his bloated physique, purple eye-bags and fuzzy “work” slippers, clinging to McCreedy with obsequious devotion.

Still, excitement tingled in her fingers and at the nape of her neck. For the past two months it had all been the same: shotgun blasts in *Reservation Hiyaw!* and *Hay Hey, Mamma Used to Say* (Bradley Price, CEO of Cups for Pups and big time donor, liked westerns) were followed by spear punctures in various Greek and Roman productions. Those took place exclusively in The Theater of Tragedy on Eighth and Thirty-First, but everyone just called it “The Oedipus,” due to their weekly productions of *Oedipus Rex* that began promptly at eight o’clock on Thursdays. She appreciated Martin, the owner’s, loyalty to her, especially loyalty that generated a weekly paycheck, but she had grown tired of working with the long, period appropriate spears. They were simply too big to allow for much creativity during the act of dying. And they always had to be thrown by someone else.

She clutched the small prop dagger she held in her right hand even tighter. She enjoyed what she did. She loved the exquisite moment of performed pain before the equally marvelous fall. But it was never quite as good when another person was involved. Mistakes were likely to be made -- not big ones, but a shift here, a second too early there, and the performance, the release, lacked satisfaction. She preferred dying by her own hand. Then, every moment was hers alone.

Tonight, she would stab herself to death. Just the thought of it made her smile, although it quickly turned into a grimace as actual pain probed at the backs of her knees and moved downwards, following the beads of sweat that had been steadily collecting at the place where stocking met skin. She hunched lower, wishing she had a cane to lean on

to complete the evil witch caricature. Unfinished things made her nervous. She really was dressed for it: a black feathered headdress, long black gown, painted on black eyebrows and bloody red lips. Her features were muted by the greasepaint even more than usual. “Genevieve,” her rather famous character, was allotted a single descriptive line, “female, 20s, sad clown.” Like many recent revivals of her, McCreeley had interpreted that to mean that she doused herself in gothic overtones and heavy foundation, unlike earlier revivals that had actually gone for the red nose and the floppy wig. There were defenders of both interpretations, along with an internet group entirely devoted to proving that the phrase was simply a gin-induced typo created by a playwright afflicted with coulrophobia.

The couch was being moved offstage; she could hear the squeaking. Her entrance was in five minutes and thirty-nine seconds based on the last six run-throughs. She willed it to be sooner. The dull pain in her knees was creeping back. It was an honor to be shut in this box, they’d said. A big honor. She should feel honored. Instead, she remembered what McCreeley said when he’d first showed her the contraption, the two of them standing side-by-side on the empty stage staring down into a dark abyss: “This’ll make you wanna die.” He breathed out smoke and admiration. Before her, the tiny elevator shrank until it was the size of a pin prick and was swallowed by the blackness. Stumbling, she had backed away, leaving the shadows and the gloom for McCreeley’s enjoyment alone. That wasn’t her process. She didn’t puncture herself with sharpened bobby pins, or choke herself in her dressing room, or pay someone to punch her in the stomach. She didn’t need any of that to do what she did.

Her throat was dry, so dry. Everything that wasn’t moist, itched. The walls seemed to be slowly inching closer. Her chest hollowed out. She could feel the

waterproof mascara dripping down onto her reddened cheeks. She wiped it away. Then she kept wiping. She clawed at her face obsessively until her fingers were blackened. The corners of her eyes were terrifically inflamed. The spider dropped to the floor, stricken. “Monstrous, am I?” she said, ostensibly to it.

With a lurch, the box began to move. She shifted forward, her grimy hands pressed against opposite walls as the ground inched away. The play became more distinct. She could hear fragments of dialogue.

“I’m not -- loving you--light.”

“...light?--Cry--night--” [sound of a slap]

“Lord--body--Can--punishing me enough?”

*Fuck!* She gave a sharp intake of breath. It was the wrong dialogue. She was too early. They hadn’t even gotten to the confession. The ride halted abruptly with a tremendous shudder and a long whine to follow. Too far below was solid ground; above, the voices were still achingly far. She was stranded.

The play continued. The box hung in the nothingness. She held on for dear life, both knees bent, head bowed, body tilted to the left to compensate for the right leaning structure. She fantasized about stabbing Stan over and over until his fuzzy slippers were filled with blood. His high-pitched screams only encouraged the knife to slip between his ribs. The box shuddered again. It tilted forward now, right and forward. She threw herself left and back, contorting gruesomely, knees popping, chest folded into her distended stomach, lunch bubbling up. She imagined McCreedy’s face, a putrid grin from ear to ear. “Let her dangle.” The hangman complied.

Finally, with a disquieting tremor, the hoisting began again. But brightness was coming through the cracks now, stage lights. She could hear her cue: “You’re lying, you couldn’t have killed her!” Lena’s voice came through louder, “Then how would I know about you and Carl, or about the pool rake, for that matter!” She was going to make it. She was going to die. Yes, the top of the box was beginning to slide open, along with the trapdoor in the stage. As she straightened, everything came back into focus with sharp, furious clarity. A few more inches...and *at last*.

She could see the actors, positioned in front of where the stage opened up so as to hide the lift returning to the depths after depositing its cargo. With desperate feline stealth, she left the decrepit husk behind and climbed up into the light. The other actors parted down the middle and the audience gasped. In a delightful trick, a woman had suddenly appeared center stage.

“Genevieve!” Lena said, with more horror than usual due to the blotched, grisly appearance of her castmate. “Oh darling, you overheard!” “Genevieve” glared back at her, loathing Lena’s dismay that she read as contempt. She shifted into position, feet on her mark, the tip of the knife just brushing the small of her back. It was time. At this point in the script there was only one direction: *Genevieve stabs herself*. In rehearsal, McCreedy had also given only one direction: “Die sad.” The first, as usual, skimmed the surface of her actions. The second was offensive. Her performances were good because she died happy, every time.

But she wasn’t happy now. McCreedy’s smile, Lena’s consternation, Stan’s incompetence, they had all ruined her. Because of them, she had to die a hideous, dripping, limping wreck. Hot tears welling up to complete the awful picture, she raised

the knife high enough to glint in the spotlight, and brought it down with practiced force. It had just grazed the fabric over her heart when she reverted to instinct. Knees torqued, eyes raised, hand drifting, and then...she let go. Her fury disappeared. She soared. Her form was perfect. In this moment, she had perfected it. Too quickly, the tops of her eyelashes brushed the dented stage and landing, she inhaled a mouthful of dust. Her breath slowed to an imperceptible crawl, completing the illusion of decease. She was utterly content.

And, for the first time in the history of her career, the play, the director, or even the theater, the audience gave a standing ovation.

### ***Chapter 1: The Billboard***

*“The Wrightly Crumple” is the name given to the legendary fall performed by Deborah Wrightly. It first appeared on the scene last year, when Ms. Wrightly was hired for the notorious role of “sad clown” Genevieve in a performance of The Washerwoman. After the initial stabbing, the move consists of the knees torquing to the left, the eyes rising hauntingly upwards, and one hand drifting towards the hilt of the knife, almost grasping it before the body crumples to the floor--hence the name. It is now considered to be the most exemplary way to die.*

*-Explosion Theatre Magazine*

The billboard looked down imposingly on a ground floor cafe painted an unappealing reddish brown and covered in damp “NO HELP WANTED” signs. The eatery’s position within the skyscraper, or Pencil, as buildings on Third Street were commonly referred to, indicated the quality of the coffee to be found on its premises. In front of the cafe, although not in any way affiliated with it, was the dollar section of an outdoor eating area, stretching just past the bus stop until it hit the long, bright pink line separating it from the rain protected six dollar division. The dollar tables were a little over halfway filled, while one six dollar table was occupied, and further down, all of the fourteen dollar, well-cushioned couches stood empty.

After depositing a dollar each in the meter, two people in matching thin raincoats sat down at the table closest to the billboard, and looked up at it. The billboard was large, aggressively colored, and stated in bold lettering “**featuring Deborah Wrightly.**” It said other things too-- the name of the play, the director, and at the bottom in an even bigger font, **Get Tickets Now!!** If Deborah Wrightly had noticed the words at the bottom of the billboard, specifically, the two exclamation points, she would have found it confusing, even manipulative. She would likely have told Greg Goring, her fellow raincoated roommate, that the play was a tragedy about the adult trauma of several child kidnap

victims and that the exclamation points were inappropriate. Instead, upon first spotting “**featuring Deborah Wrightly,**” it was all Deborah Wrightly saw.

After Greg had looked at the billboard long enough to feel as though he had sufficiently taken it in, he opened his bag and deployed his attention strictly to his dinner. It was Wednesday, or ham sandwich night: mustard spread only on one slice of bread, no mayo, a whole tomato divided up evenly on both halves, and two leaves of lettuce folded between slices of havarti cheese. That was how Greg liked his sandwiches; nothing more, nothing less. If, when taking his first bite, one half felt more stuffed than the other, he would take it apart and rearrange.

He was concluding that process now, preparing to take his second bite just as Deb was finishing her own identical meal. When she’d first moved in, Deb found watching him eat fascinating, like seeing Albert the Badger from the *Frances* books she’d loved as a kid come to life. It had become only slightly less novel over time. She looked on now as he took neat, delicate bites, powerfully appreciating his food. As always, he made her feel as though she had stuffed her dinner down her gullet with disgusting violence.

Around them, people passed by hurriedly, speeding up as the clouds came together again after a brief pause. The scent of oncoming damp intermingled with tomato sauce from the pizza chain restaurant across the street. Someone bumped Greg’s chair on their way to the crosswalk--a mother, instead of the child bouncing beside her. The mother scooped up the child and walked faster. Over her shoulder, the little girl mouthed, “Sorry,” to Greg, and then giggled when his chair was again shoved by a sour-faced teenager. None of them looked at the billboard. Deb’s neck began to ache from looking at it too much.

“Stop staring.” Greg swallowed a mouthful of ham and mustard with an effort.

“Aaargh.”

“What?” Deb looked down sharply, cracking her neck in the process.

“Too much mustard.” Greg sighed. He thought he had been so careful this time.

Deb looked up again.

“You’re making it weird.”

“It’s wrong.” She spoke definitively.

Greg took another big bite. “What is?”

“My name.”

“No it’s not. It’s Wright.” Greg snorted.

“You have lettuce on your chin.” Deb gestured underneath her lip.

Greg dapped at his face effately with more tissue than he needed. He always brought tissues along with extra napkins if they were eating out, to wipe down the tables with. Deb didn’t mind. She never had to fret about an unclean surface. And in these situations, he gave her silence; the best, most comfortable silence where she didn’t have to feel the pressure of conversation, while still sharing the same air as another person.

“Why is it wrong?” Apparently, today he wasn’t in the mood for silence.

Deb watched him throw a napkin into the bin behind her. It missed. He immediately bent backwards, stretching out his left arm as far as it would go until his fingertips just reached the trash. He threw it twice more before it landed right.

“It’s awkward. Doesn’t read well. *Featuring Deborah Wrightly.*” She stretched out each syllable. “It sounds like I’m a motivational speaker.”

“Make your wrong life Wrightly?”



Deb smiled in spite of herself. "It should be Deborah Wright, but then..."

"The Wright Crumple?" Greg tried out the name. "That's an English tea-shop. With roses on the plates and annoying pinky sandwiches that never fill you up."

"How would you know they never fill you up?"

"How would *you* know they do?" Greg parried.

Deb leaned back in her chair, which promptly squeaked. "I could make it something else entirely."

"Like what?"

"Like...Hatfield. Or Prescott."

"So you either come from eastern Kentucky or summer in Maine?" Greg guffawed.

"I've got some WASP-y blood in me--"

"You're not becoming a Prescott." Greg finished his sandwich. "You can't hold your emotion."

She looked away, tight-faced, as heavy rain began to fall in earnest. It soaked the billboard, drowning Deb's name. Greg shivered and hunched lower into his thin raincoat, wanting more than anything to go home. They had come, they had seen, he had appreciated, that was enough. He studied the rigid profile across from him, a profile that sometimes seemed to belong to a stranger. The woman was of average height and build. Her hair was dark, but her eyes would be pleasantly light if the effect wasn't ruined by the mammoth bags beneath them. She sat forward slightly, her shoulders hunched into her hood, and her arms crossed as if to protect her chest. He wondered how someone so claustrophobic could stand to feel so compressed.

“Speaking of which, when can we cash in the free appetizer coupon at Sally’s?”

Greg had a habit of continuing an unspoken thought aloud.

“The last quiz I took says I’m close.” Deb spoke defensively. “I got inside the elevator last week, remember?”

“You jumped out a second before the doors closed, screaming at the poor guy who pressed the button.” Greg was overcome with giggles before finishing the sentence.

“He didn’t ask if I was going up or down.” Deb said defensively. Embarrassment curled her insides. She hated to be made a spectacle of.

“Quizzes just sell ads, Deb. You gotta get some medication or something.”

Deb refrained from pointing out that getting to where medication was offered from any decent pharmacy required getting in an elevator. Doctor’s offices, pharmacies, therapists, they were categorized as essential, and therefore existed on the highest floors: two-hundred and above. Any lower than that and you get beach pebbles being sold as “stress reducers.” They never worked, no matter how tightly you clenched them your fist and how intently you pictured a balloon slowly drifting towards the sky. She knew that for a fact. As Deb balked at the notion of climbing no less than a hundred flights of stairs (Dr. Stevens was located on 104 and also provided parrot therapy), she was on her own.

There was silence for a moment, and then--“FREE APPETIZERS,” Greg said, as if he were referring to the first crop after a famine.

“On the TWELFTH FLOOR,” said Deb.

“You could just give me the coupon...” He spoke wheedlingly.

“Nope.”

“Hoarder.”

“What’s my one rule?” Deb asked commandingly.

“Don’t touch the coupon drawer.” Greg sighed. Discounts were piling up and he was itching for them badly. Deb was a good roommate, mostly; quiet, alone a lot, liked the food he liked, bizarre enough for him to comfortably eat in front of her. But her new claustrophobia had begun to encroach on his routine. Should it even be called claustrophobia? Maybe Elevator-phobia? Up and down-motion-phobia? He wasn’t exactly sure what part of the elevator experience was so paralyzing to her. It didn’t matter much. He did all the shopping anyway by choice, and the cleaning. But he needed those coupons. The hood of his raincoat suddenly split at the seams, and his head was doused in freezing water. He sighed again, heavier. An argument was coming, and he wanted to postpone it for as long as possible.

Deb had gone back to staring at the billboard like an expectant bird waiting for seeds. He looked up too, blinking quickly in the face of the relentless liquid, only because it was better than looking down into the puddles, or ahead at the dying trees and the unoccupied, more expensive tables safely ensconced underneath the bright green awning. His gaze traveled up the immense height of each skyscraper. The severely pointed tops that had given the Pencils their nickname glistened and winked. The top third of each building was dark, the penthouse down to the bigger retailers. Everyone who worked up there, the 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. crowd, had all gone home hours ago during the first wave of exits. The rest of the building shined brightly, although, as he watched, one window darkened. And then another. Somewhere, all the clocks turned to 8:00. He had no watch, but he knew because the second wave had begun. And they were trapped.

The next set of floors had begun to empty out. 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. people piled onto the street, right side Pencil people hurriedly crossing left side Pencil people. For a long minute, their little table was the center of a choking hurricane of bodies. Deb paled, the chains keeping her rickety chair attached to the street trembling. But then lines were formed and people fell in behind each other with mechanized precision, marching in formation towards the furthest most corners. Right on time, buses began to turn down the street, halting with a screech before the orderly congregations. Their bright orange doors opened, and the fat circle of bodies began to thin. Greg watched until the procession ended, and then turned back. Now, only the bottom third of each Pencil was lit up. The third wave was at 10:00 p.m., for those who had started at 7:00 a.m.

Greg had been one of those 7:00 a.m. people a few months back, in the very Pencil they sat parallel to now. An old boss who'd taken a fatherly liking to him had become a hiring manager, and offered Greg a temporary position on the second floor. When he'd first arrived excitedly at his shiny desk, the chair said, "Howdy!" He named the voice Moira, and then felt a little guilty every time he sat down heavily. It wasn't until a week later that he realized the computer was watching him. The Smart Desk was a new innovation. Greg liked the massage feature that would turn on automatically if you shifted more than ten times an hour. Greg did not like mouse tracking as a competitive sport, Moira's built-in motivational phrases, and the bright green camera light that he could never figure out how to switch off (its cover repelled all adhesive material). Before long, he started sweating through his shirts by lunch. Then he needed four shirts a day. Eventually, he could only sit completely upright, elbows pulled into his chest, deodorant

in one drawer, three tissue boxes in the other, dabbing at his face with one hand while continuing to type with the other. He still missed the money.

He needed those coupons. Across the table, Deb was looking a little less sickly. Greg opened his mouth to begin the quarrel, but before any words came out there was an interruption. “Excuse me, but are you Deborah Wrightly?” A woman’s voice, low and croaking, encroached into the space.

She was middle-aged, small and slight, all big glasses and running mascara. She stood just underneath the billboard behind Greg, the bright colors washing out her skin, her features rather sunken.

Deb was startled and a little gratified. “Yes?”

The woman hustled around the table and reached out her hand for Deb to shake. “Oh my lord, I’m Miriam Lodge, I’m such a big fan of your work.” She gestured upwards. “It’s going to be a wonderful production, isn’t it? I have tickets for next week.”

“I’m so glad.” Deb was still shaking her hand in a bemused sort of fashion. Normally, if she was recognized in the street, the person would simply fall to the ground in an exaggerated impersonation of the Crumple. She was never sure what they expected: applause? A series of corrections? She usually just stepped over them. Nobody ever actually spoke to her.

Miriam Lodge continued, “I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you; my son would be so delighted. He just loved ‘The Wrightly Crumple,’ imitated it to perfection.”

“Oh! That’s...wow. For a high-school production or something? It’s a tricky move. He must be athletic.” Deb’s voice gave off a false, high tinkle, but she began to enjoy the interaction.

The woman pulled a chair over as far as its chain would allow from the next table, and plopped down. “Oh no, he couldn't act for the life of him. Tried it once at a Shakespeare camp junior year. Poor boy. No no, the *Crumple* was how he died.”

“How he--” Deb stuttered.

“Died,” the woman repeated. “He used a lovely pearl-handled dagger. Had it sharpened beforehand. Quite beautiful, really. Don't you think?” She gave a high-pitched shrieking sort of laugh.

Deb was frozen.

Greg's mouth hung open. He was silent. He could feel a piece of ham stuck in one of his back molars. But his jaw refused to close.

Miriam looked from one to the other for a moment without comprehension. Then a ghastly haughtiness took over her features. “It was a painless expression of his genius. A gift to himself.” She stood up as swiftly as obviously arthritic knees would allow. When she spoke to Deb, it was with absolute certainty. “You should be flattered.”

There was a loud crack of thunder; in the swift downpour that followed, Miriam was gone. Deb wiped her hair out of her eyes, blinking furiously, unsure whether her face was covered in rain or tears. Greg's mouth was still open, hair plastered to his forehead, his eyes blankly looking at the spot where Miriam had been standing.

## *Chapter 2: Home*

*If you need a place to eat where your child can play with other darling angels in perfect safety, come on up to Happy Munchkins! Situated on the second floor of ten beautiful, downtown skyscrapers from Third Street all the way to Eighteenth, we are now proud to present our new Cleansing Mist. Every fifteen minutes, this outstanding innovation clears the air and all surfaces of all possible germs and fecal matter that may have accumulated since the last spritz. It comes with a soothing lavender scent, clinically proven to invoke serenity. Our security team members are all fully trained in the art of fun, keeping a watchful eye on your little ones so that you can enjoy one of our several new value platters. For the price of only six dollars you get a full meal, plus your choice of alcoholic beverage. Only at Happy Munchkins!*

The next morning, Greg tried to gage Deb's emotions. She sat in her usual spot across from him, sipping her reheated tea and spearing her overcooked egg whites. Apart from a drawn quality to her face, Deb was plain old Deb. Or maybe he was bad at gaging.

"So--ah..about the incident yesterday..." The word "incident" felt dire enough without being too specific.

"I've decided I'm fine with Deborah Wrightly," she said, before his significant pause could fully land. "As my name." She took up two pieces of toast from the hot plate between them.

"Sure," Greg said warily.

He scooped up some blueberry jam and bit down on the various questions that lurked behind his teeth. Deb was like a twig, always about to snap. At least, that was the aura she gave off. He was instinctively cautious. She slathered butter on her toast in silence; he didn't blame her. But as it continued day after day, it started to bother him.

Rain fell in sharp bursts over the next few weeks, accompanied by thunder, and followed by long half-days of eerie calm. The cheery, thin-lipped guy on Channel Eight called it "suicide weather." He was quietly replaced the next day by a tired woman of

dubious age and puffed out cheeks. Greg noticed immediately. He was home all afternoon now. The night shift at Fat n' Upps was eighty cents an hour more pay, and raccoon-eye Sarah had neglected to show up four times in a row, so the fluorescent graveyard had become his. Coming home at 4:30 a.m. caused the return of his nervous spasm, something in between a wink and grimace that shuddered down the left side of his face. Nobody he encountered was appreciative, so he tried to compensate by blinking the other eye convulsively every time it happened. The result was frightening.

He cleaned more and more every day, even meticulously organizing all of Deb's products by brand name, then the next day alphabetically, then the day after that by which one smelled the nicest. He wiped and folded and sprayed and shelved to the pounding beat of the downpour. The old radio he'd brought from his childhood bedroom to his City College dorm room to this room, where it sat on top of the washing machine, kept getting static right when the chorus kicked in. So he sang. He had a gravelly singing voice, made lower from seasonal allergies and exhaustion. The effect was not altogether unpleasant.

Rather unfortunately, nobody was there to experience it. Deb was rarely out of the theater now. She had performances six days a week including matinees, and would stay hours later than what was required, stumbling home in the early a. m. She was awake long enough to reheat whatever Greg had made for dinner and strenuously remove every trace of makeup. In the morning, the table, microwave and bathroom counter told the tale. A sad story. They ate an exhausted breakfast together before Deb left for her afternoon call time, Greg munching over a mystery novel, Deb listening to the television in the background. Then the makeup was back on and she was gone, leaving only a thin, beige



layer of powder dusting the mirror. It was the first thing Greg wiped away, as he started to clean.

There was air between them now. Deb *still* said nothing about Miriam Lodge, and Greg refused to bring it up until she did. It was about her, after all. Her weird job and her weird fans. He didn't even know she had fans. The only thing she ever boasted of was being steadily hired. The more he disinfected, the more curious he became. Deb was perfectly understandable until she became completely unfathomable. Maybe he just understood all the bad parts of her. Maybe, unlike him, sometimes she was amazing.

So he went to see her perform.

Deb always got complimentary tickets that ended up strewn about all over the apartment; in one memorable instance, he'd found them balled up deep inside the bathtub drain. She told him he could use them anytime, but he never found the descriptions appealing. The happier the ending, the less logic the story seemed to follow. Everything else advertised guaranteed it would vampirically suck all the dopamine out of you. His mother was a nurse; he preferred to keep what little he had left of the stuff intact, thank you very much.

He chose the play at The Regent because it was her earliest show. The play was also his first, a packed Saturday night performance. The building lobby hummed, stuffed to the brim with coats that, like his own, showed signs of having been sewn back together ten or twelve times. Greg had picked up some tricks watching his mother, and the costume designers who appeared sporadically at the apartment to fit Deb into pre-existing outfits for low-end shows; he had grown adept at putting his wrecked clothes back

together over and over again. As he passed by amidst the crowd, he was able to notice some nice patch work here and there.

There were couples and families with teenagers grouped together by the elevator, weighing whether or not to it was too early to head up to the theater. But there were also people sitting alone, on small, stiff couches and little upright chairs, staring vaguely into a different plane. Greg followed their lead, glad to be one of a number. He headed for a newly vacated wide couch across from a man enshrouded by the hood of his sweatshirt, dozing. When Greg plopped down, the man woke with a start. The hood dropped; a familiar voice emerged.

“Goring?”

“Sam?” Greg was startled at the sight of his pinched, spotty face. Sam was the fryer guy at Fat n’ Stuff; nice enough, hardly talkative. Definitely not the type he would’ve pegged for a theater fan. “You like...this?” He waved vaguely.

“Sure, sure.” Sam was still sleepy. “I come every second Saturday after my sixteen hour shift.”

“I could’ve been giving ‘em to you all this time,” Greg huffed with his usual lack of clarity.

“What?” Sam asked.

“I hate waste...” he mumbled. “Deb wastes everything--”

“Deb, Deborah Wrightly?” Sam was awake.

“Yeah--?”

“DEBORAH WRIGHTLY?”

“Hey, don’t scream. There’s a baby over there. Then it will scream and we’ll all be sad.” Greg was discomfited by Sam’s elated expression.

“Can I do the Crumple for her?” Sam asked eagerly. “Just once? I’ve been practicing.”

“Practicing?”

“Hell, yeah, whenever the orders are slow.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “I keep a switchblade in my front pocket, underneath the apron.”

“Is *that* how you got all those bruises on your knees?” Greg stood up. “I KNEW you didn’t just slip. I got blamed for that, you know. Boss said my “excessive cleaning” made the floor too slippery, so he didn’t give me that twenty-four hour shift.”

“Oh--ah--er...Goring, I’m sorry.” Sam stumbled over his words apologetically.

“This is stupid,” Greg said flatly. “Deb’s just an actress. And kind of a shitty roommate, but I forgive her for that most of the time.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam repeated.

He looked so pathetic that Greg sat back down and sighed. “Don’t worry about it.”

“To be fair, every time you deep clean the fryer, I drop it.” Sam said gently.

“Well, there’s a price for not getting syphilis.”

“Name one fast food worker with syphilis,” Sam was amused.

“Why would they tell anyone they had syphilis? They’d just get fired.” Greg was getting annoyed.

“So there’s a grand syphilis conspiracy--”

“YES.” Greg crossed his arms.

“Fine,” Sam said sarcastically. “You’re solving the giant syphilis problem one bottle of Speckless Fresh at a time.”

Greg reached into his hole-filled pocket and drew out a mini version of Speckless Fresh, brandishing it before Sam in a proud, provoking manner. It was a comic, pitiable display, and the mockery faded from Sam’s face.

“Can I get a spritz?” Sam put out his hands.

Greg saw defeat. He spritzed. “You’re welcome,” he said, as Sam rubbed his hands together.

“At least syphilis is one thing I won’t have to worry about,” Sam half-joked.

“Right,” Greg said definitively.

Then, each pondering all the other things they had to worry about, they buried their chins in their coats in mutual gloom.

A few minutes later, Greg shuffled to the back of the tightly packed elevator on its way up to the theater. Sam hadn’t suggested that they go up together, and Greg was fine with that. He was a fan, and Greg didn’t like watching anything with fans. They were always, inevitably, just watching him. And his reactions were never what they wanted. Squeezed in beside Greg’s shoulder, a woman was complaining about the weather to her husband, although he got the sense she was actually talking about something else. She twisted the large wedding band she wore over and over, the volume of her words slightly louder than was elevator appropriate. Maybe that was what Deb hated: the awkwardness baked into the elevator experience, the evaluation of everyone’s manners. The husband replied soothingly, but his eyes darted around, as if looking to see exasperated expressions. Greg showed him the back of his head. He liked that there was someone

speaking. It broke the arbitrary silence that always felt profoundly illogical to him, considering this was a motley cluster of people pressed together for a significant stretch of time. Yesterday, he'd gone from work straight to the expensive bakery on the one-hundredth floor of the Cycle Building for those fresh muffins with the extra nutty topping. They were his usual reward for surviving a shift that lasted over a day. The ride to get there had been eighteen minutes of total silence among twenty people. He had counted all his teeth twice, and the number of white hairs on the head of the balding guy in front of him once (twelve, for the record).

As the elevator continued to swoosh upwards, Greg tried to remember what floor the theater was on. Deb had said it was sponsored by someone good, a cereal maybe? Something sweet and crunchy. It would probably be on a lower floor: eight, or nine. Places backed by food that came in boxes never had a view.

The doors finally opened on the eleventh floor, and Greg piled out with the rest. There was not a single staircase in sight, or a door that would logically lead to a staircase, or anything except a long hallway with big, grand, double doors at the end of it. He tried to search the bare, pastel walls for some kind of new-age flotation chamber, but he was soon swept inside like everybody else. How did Deb make it to work every day? Did she climb up the side of the building in a harness? Zipline from window to window? Picturing the latter, he chuckled to himself as he was helped to one of the hundreds of red leather seats that formed neat, crescent rows in front of the grand, old stage. The ushers all wore bright green vests, and were invariably either under the age of twenty-five, or over the age of sixty. It was the same at Fat n' Ups, whose yearly employee photos displayed proudly over the ball pit had a lecherous quality that was unavoidable. Once he hit thirty, would

time simply speed up? Would he suddenly be an oldie, past having to explain his failure? He hoped so.

The play began with crying, someone rocking back and forth to the sounds of a violin mixed with a vacuum, and then overlaid on top of old-fashioned gunshots. Greg studied the set. It was dressed as an ornate kitchen, but there was no stove to be seen.

Unless...was it obscured by the giant tree puppet behind the fake window? He spent the next twenty minutes searching the stage. All the characters were drinking tea out of clear mugs. Where did they boil the water? They had gone to the trouble of building a full kitchen island complete with a built-in knife set, but no microwave. The product placement was staring them in the face! They kept stating the kind of tea it was, Esterhazy's Finest Oolong; *bring me Esterhazy Oolong, brew me Esterhazy Oolong, Esterhazy Oolong with a little bourbon please honey*. It all seemed so much harder than just slapping a Vortex Corporation logo on the side of an appliance. *Oolong, Oolong, Oolong, Oolong*. The word rolled around in his mouth pleasantly.

“SShhhh.”

Something poked him. It was the same guy from the elevator. His wife was fast asleep on his chest. It was unclear whether the man wanted him to be quiet because of the play, or her nap. Greg gave an apologetic shrug. The woman never stirred.

He eventually took to studying the stone faces around him, watching them twitch and sink and yawn; if only he could clean out their ears, wash away darkened flecks below their sinking eyes, and straighten their ties.

Finally, Deb appeared; she wafted out from stage left, a knife in one hand, wearing the most achingly tragic expression he'd ever seen. She advanced to center stage,

and a hush fell. The slumping crowd sat up abruptly. Greg leaned forward in his seat. She raised the knife slowly, just enough for the light to catch the blade. Then she brought it down sharply over her heart, her whole face contorting upon impact. The knife clattered to the floor as she crumpled, landing balletically on her side with one arm reaching for the audience and the other lying over her heart. She was a woman laid bare; the audience devoured her. Greg was the only one who didn't join in the feast. He was too unnerved.

Lying there, Deb looked peaceful enough to roll out a coffin. It wasn't acting. It was something else. Something alien. He exited the theatre as quietly as he could while everyone was still clapping.

That night, Deb came home to an empty fridge. The starkness was alarming, and a little hurtful. She had grown accustomed to Greg's unspoken promise of food. More than that, if he found a routine, he stuck to it, always. She ate three pieces of leftover pie and collapsed onto the pile of clothes strewn over her bedspread, falling asleep before she could seriously consider this lapse in procedure.

He was gone for three days.

For the first twenty-four hours, Deb assumed he was on one of his energy shot fueled two day shifts at Fat n' Ups. But rent wasn't due for over two weeks. This gnawed at her on the second day. The third day, she was properly panicked.

On the plus side, everyone told her the *Crumple* was particularly effective. Not in words, of course. At the Checkerboard, two teenage girls waited for over an hour by the darkened backstage entrance (breaking the previous record of forty-two minutes), falling down in weak imitations as soon as she appeared. Deb barreled past them before they could raise their gravel-sullied heads to check if she was watching. The owner of the

Regent, Mrs. Van-Houghten, who had inherited the theater from Mr. Van-Houghten over twenty years ago and was now attempting to fish it out of a money pit, had stolen a rose out of the bouquet meant for the director. She presented it to Deb reverently before attempting the *Crumple*. Mrs. Van-Houghten was old and weak, and Deb helped her up afterwards, feeling that it would be too cruel not to.

Still clutching the rose, Deb walked through the door at 1:00 a.m. rubbing a sore muscle and thinking of medium rare steak, to find Greg slouched over a manilla envelope at the kitchen table. He was wearing some kind of colorfully grotesque animal costume with giant, floppy ears and a grin to match.

“He was murdered!” Greg’s tone had all the pep of a head cheerleader.

“What in the theme park hell are you wearing?” Deb slung her coat over a chair and sat as far away from him as the table would allow. She wondered if he had taken something too off brand to be safe. There were whispers of a RagePlexus “mystery” ingredient.

“Fat n’ Upps still won’t let me work more than ten hours a day, so I took an all night shift at Happy Munchkins to pay for a ticket to Boston.” His impatient tone shifted to a horrified whisper. “If you’re new, you have to be the clown.”

“Well, Boston’s a tough town.” Deb’s relief was overpowered by her hunger. She wondered if he’d made any mac n’ cheese.

“*Hah, hah.* I think the manager likes that floating tissue commercial a little too much, and there were NO hand-washing reminders on the bathroom wall doors except for when I penciled some in above the sinks--but that’s not the point.” He leaned forward, eyes popping out. “I went to East Mulville and I found Miriam Lodge.”



“Miriam Lodge. The...woman who--that woman?” Deb stiffened.

“You remember her,” Greg said with exasperation.

And he was right. She couldn't stop remembering Miriam Lodge. Deb looked across the table at the ridiculous picture of self-satisfaction, a man she knew to be thoroughly unfortunate but infallibly honest. “You found Miriam Lodge.” The words came out slowly, as if she was discovering them.

“Look,” Greg was busy opening the folder and laying out documents before Deb with a prosecutor's surety. “I went to the East Mulville police station and I asked about the Lodge boy's death and I said was a reporter doing a piece on theater inspired deaths and the officer said that sounded like a great article and that more and more have been popping up and he had a great watch and we got drinks together and his wife's divorcing him because he collects too many eye glass cases and I told him that my wife was divorcing me too but for something way less creepy and he gave me the file on Jacob Lodge and the door was locked from the outside not the inside so there had to have been someone else there, someone who killed the poor kid. He was dealing I think, so they arranged the body like the *Crumple* to make it look like he snuffed himself,” He finished triumphantly, a little out of breath.

“More and more have been popping up,” Deb said painstakingly.

“What?” Greg's euphoria was beginning to fade.

“You said *more and more have been popping up.*” Deb repeated. “More deaths, more-- *WRIGHTLY CRUMPLE DEATHS.*”

“Did you even hear me? It was a drug shakedown gone bad. Totally TV, nothing to do with you.”

“Why did you do this?” Deb’s anger grew. “Why did you go there, why did you find this?”

“I thought it would help.” Greg was taken aback.

“HELP? Help with what?”

“Help you,” he said quietly.

“WELL IT DIDN’T,” Deb shouted, frantically rubbing her wrist across one eye, leaving a blackened trail.

There was silence...a new silence, tangy, messy. Deb hiccuped. Greg nervously scratched the underside of the old, reddish wood table they’d bought together as strangers. In that thorny, uneasy calm, a timer went off. They both jumped.

“I made mac n’ cheese,” Greg mumbled.

Deb ran around the table and enveloped him in a hug, ears and all.

“Deb, you don’t have to...ghhff--” his voice was muffled by her sweater. “You were mad at me three seconds ago; you’re so weird.” She hugged him tighter. “Pay’s kinda good if you’re the entertainment,” he said with an embarrassed inflection, the words still slightly indistinct. Deb let go.

“At Munchkins?”

He nodded. “I guess I’ll go back. It’s almost the 20th.” He gestured toward the calendar stuck to the fridge where day 20 was circled in bright purple.

“But, look at you.” Deb’s horrified eyes ran over the ears, one of which had been flattened by her embrace and now hung limply below Greg’s rather soft chin.

Greg grinned his self-deprecating grin. “It’s not like I wasn’t a joke before.”

Deb couldn't argue with him. Perhaps he had wanted her to try, for the grin dripped down into something more miserable.

Simply to counteract the wretchedness of the moment, Deb reached over and snatched the dog headpiece right off his scalp. It made a sound like ripping velcro. She threw it across the room, where it landed perfectly balanced and absurdly smiling on top of the woodish antique hat rack that had come with the apartment. One of the velcro eyes had actually come off, falling to the level of the dog's large nose. At the sight of the twisted picture, with the one eye now looking over at its ears instead of straight ahead, the two immediately succumbed to peals of uncontrollable laughter, the saggy, spotted material covering Greg's stomach jiggling furiously.

They ate mac n' cheese and tater tots in front of some cooking show that pitted child chefs against monkeys. Greg didn't tell Deb that he'd finally seen her perform the *Crumple*. Deb didn't tell Greg that she began combing the internet for Wrightly Crumple related deaths the moment he got up to check on the tots. After the final monkey won, they went to bed. For each, sleep was a long time in coming.

### *Chapter 3: The Regent Theater*

7 across: *A deadly move that's sweeping the city.*

*(Answer: Wrightly Crumple)*

“You’re a crossword solution.”

Deb looked up from her toast. “I’m a what?”

Greg threw the newspaper across the table, where it landed smack in the middle of the butter dish. “Sorry.”

Deb gingerly picked up the paper by one corner, searching for the small print at the bottom of the page. There it was, nestled amidst the other answers: *Wrightly Crumple*, followed by *cauliflower*, and *dentistry*. “Cool.”

“Cool?” Greg helped himself to a hearty portion of jam. “Nobody does the crossword anymore except old ladies.”

“You filled in half of it.” Deb pointed out.

“My greatest dream *is* to be a seventy-four year old woman.” Greg cast a pointed glance back towards the sink where the used coffee pot topped two dirty pans, crusted over from some cheesy midnight snack the night before.

“I’ll wash them later,” Deb said vaguely, looking back at the paper.

Greg watched as a little smile unfurled across her face. He shifted uncomfortably, his bad arm pulsing with pain. He’d have to take an energy shot today.

“Deb.” No response.

“Deb?”

“What?” She said automatically.

“I need a shot,” he said. Still nothing. He spread more jam on a discarded piece of bread in an antsy fashion. “*Now*, I need one *now*.”

“*Alright.*” Deb took her time getting up from her chair. She walked over to the kitchen drawer below the silverware, drawing out an old glasses case and a box of bandaids. She returned to stand beside him, placing both objects on the table before moving the frayed bits of hair that drifted down to his shoulders. The case contained a large syringe that she proceeded to carefully remove. Greg averted his eyes from the sharp edge of the needle.

“Promotion like that has to be good, right?” she said by way of distraction, as she searched for a vein on his neck. “And on top of the perks...the car and the--”

“AH,” Greg yelped.

The needle was in. Deb pressed down on the plunger with practiced assurance. “Who knows what could come next...” She let the thought dangle as the colorless liquid drained from the little tube. A few seconds later, the needle was withdrawn. Deb retrieved a long bandaid from the box before her and began the process of covering the puncture hole as discreetly as possible. Employers in Greg’s line of work knew that most of their employees did shots, especially on shifts lasting more than twelve hours. Most of the time they accepted it, but it was better not to flaunt it.

Soon, Deb returned the syringe to its home, commenting, “Remember to get more from Lev next week.”

Greg rubbed the area around the wound and tried to climb out of the grim mood that had seized him. One of the side effects of energy injections was hyperemotionality. Deb’s happiness was irksome. He’d gone all the way to Boston to prove that she wasn’t some medieval harbinger of death. Turns out she kinda was, and knowing it had made her... contemplate career elevation? But it was insane to think she’d quit. He knew that

now. The look on her face as she performed the *Crumple* told him why. It was a look of pure love.

Resentfully, Greg pushed back his chair. "I'm off in five."

"Okay," Deb had been contemplating a hard-boiled egg, but now she glanced up. "See you tonight?"

"Eighteen hour shift," he replied simply. He had never been so glad to leave the house.

Deb left for The Regent not long after Greg departed. She had to give herself enough time to climb up the Alby Building's servants staircase (leftover from when the structure had been a nineteenth century style estate). The bus was quiet that morning, just the usual throng of older women doing their shopping. One or two of these ladies would always bestow a grandmotherly smile on Deb, usually the ones clad in lustrous pearls from presumably better times. As Deb made her way to an empty row, one of those smiles was conferred upon her courtesy of the tiniest member of the majestic squad, whose low-heeled pumps barely touched the grimy, gum infested floor. Deb smiled back and sat down, still clutching the newspaper. While the bus rattled on, she returned to studying the seven words it contained: *A deadly move that's sweeping the city*. "Deadly" was wrong. It should be "athletic," or some fancy word for dagger. But definitely not "deadly."

As she trekked up the stairs at the Alby, she was mentally walking herself through each show. This, the first of the night, was her least favorite performance. Abe Scott's staging of *To Wreck You* involved a wobbly kitchen island and a giant puppet that

shocked anyone who came in contact with its felt limbs. She was forced to squeeze past it every night to get to her mark.

The next death was far more enjoyable, near the middle of a twisty thriller less than twenty minutes away. She'd put on the dress in the car and do a quick touch up in the wings. After that was done, she'd have to peel everything off for the surrealist musical uptown. Would it be faster to wipe off the eye makeup in the car and let the backstage people help her button up the blouse? Or vice-versa? Maybe--

“Congratulations!”

Deb jumped. The landing was overflowing with people. Her eyes darted around, taking in what looked to be the whole cast crowded together, staring expectantly. She hadn't thought anyone else knew about the staircase, it was so well hidden. The door that opened onto the hallway had even been painted over so that it blended almost completely into the cherry colored wall. A short man she didn't know, but who looked to be leading the pack, gestured for her to move closer.

“Brad owns this floor,” Sarah, the stage manager, whispered in her ear. Deb cast her a thankful look, but wished Sarah's chapped lips hadn't brushed the side of her jaw. She inched forward through the suffocating bodies until Brad seemed satisfied.

“I assume you're wondering why we're all gathered here,” Brad said lightly. There were laughs; Deb quickly joined in. “Well, we've all noticed how much you seem to like these stairs. Once we found out they still existed.” He smiled broadly. Deb cast about for a good reason that wasn't the truth and found nothing. He grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face the others. Elias, the prop guy, sneezed in her face. “This woman here, walks up sixteen flights of stairs every single day just to avoid all the

gabbing you all do so much of in the elevator. She is a true actor, staying in her zone and letting it all come out in her fantastic performances. I'll have you know we've just surpassed our ticket records, and if the morning paper is anything to go by, this little lady has quite a lot to do with it. Which," he reached into a pocket, "is why I have decided to gift her with the key to my private executive staircase!"

Deb's hand was pried open, and a large gold key pressed to her palm. Brad smiled seraphically down at her. The gathering began to clap. Deb watched the group of talented actors part their lips in a practiced manner and her stomach dropped.

But when the noise died down, Deb thanked Brad with real gratitude. *Private executive staircase* said real railings, higher ceilings, that wonderful, non-mildew-y smell.

"I never use the thing, it's just for fires. The servant stairs automatically lock if the sprinklers go on so there's no additional oxygen feeding the flames." Brad whispered informationally as they exited the landing two by two. "Old-fashioned really, I voted for eradication at the board meeting but, hey, at least it's getting some use now." He clapped her on the shoulder and headed towards his office. Deb veered left towards her dressing room, clutching the key tighter with every step.

The door was open. Deb halted, remembering that she'd locked it the night before. Gathering courage, she positioned the gaudy thing in her fist so that the sharp ridges pointed out, like a weapon. Then, she peered warily inside.

Before she even saw who had broken in, Deb could smell his stench; smoke overlaid with peppermint. McCreeley always kept a bottle of something sweet-smelling



to spritz after every disgusting puff. He was sitting in the far corner of the room, waiting for her.

“McCreedy,” Deb said levelly, advancing into the room. She hadn’t seen him since he’d dropped her off at the hospital a year ago, still dressed as sad clown Genevieve. She remembered groggily telling the nurses that he’d tried to hang her.

“I heard people have been killing themselves over you, like you’re Helen of fucking Troy.” He chuckled.

“That’s not--it’s not like--” Deb stammered.

“Good show. I saw it last night.” McCreedy breezed on to the next subject.

“It’s *King Lear* in a kitchen with a puppet,” Deb said, recovering.

“So?”

“It’s *King Lear*, in a kitchen, with a puppet.” she repeated, slower.

McCreedy chortled. “One giant, heinous, felt tree. Jesus.” He shook his head like he always did before making a grand assertion. “Puppets are for directors--

“Who don’t like actors,” Deb finished for him.

He laughed again, more openly.

Deb sank down into her chair and surveyed him. He lounged across her faded, checkered couch, legs crossed over one of the arms. His temples had greyed more since she had last seen him, and two of his shirt buttons were undone. Hmmm...Stan would have never let him leave the house any less than perfect.

“The one you do in,” he checked his watch, “seventy-eight minutes though, not a bad concept for a Suthers play, even if John Bridle is an ass (and owes me money), and

the musical after that didn't make me want to irrigate both my ears." McCreedy winked.

"Just the left one."

"Why are you going to all my shows?" Deb demanded.

"Trying to find someone to bribe to let me backstage." McCreedy said. "The puffy girl carting around the catering did nicely." He gave a half-smile of resignation.

"Your agent wouldn't take my calls."

"Jerry knows I don't plan on working for you again."

"Why?" McCreedy sounded genuinely curious, but at the same time watchful.

She got the sense that he was trying to provoke her. In close proximity, the sugary scent smelled suspiciously like appetite suppressant spray.

"You are perfectly aware of the reason. It was nice to see you, but I have a show to get ready for," she gestured vaguely. "So if you would please--"

"Always so polite," he said, "It's why you're so pale."

"What would you rather I be?"

He paused, thoughtfully. "Angry," he said. "You *should* be angry, you *are* angry, I'd rather you show it. Come on," he egged, "It'll make you feel alive."

Deb merely stared.

"Alright," he said heavily. "I'll get to the point." He paused again, to create suspense. "I'm about to make you filthy rich."

"Sorry?" Deb asked blankly.

"Some CEO in a skyscraper downtown, Sunset Plaza or Sunrise or Moon or whatever, wants you for a show. The theater's in construction as we speak. It would be

*your own show*. Hell if I know why. They're calling Jerry tomorrow morning with the official shit." He paused.

The reply was a long time in coming.

"Okay." Deb finally said. "I'll talk to him then." McCreedy barely registered in her consciousness now. He had disappeared among the series of dazzling images rooted in a new, glorious potentiality that had begun flashing before her eyes.

"They want me to direct," McCreedy said.

The images vanished.

"Get out," Deb almost spat.

"Good," McCreedy said forthrightly. "Now we can talk for real." he stood up.

She was afraid he'd move closer, and whipped her head away from him, glaring sullenly at her own reflection. She despised him. She wanted to attack him. But she also wanted to listen.

"The money is insane," he started pacing around the room, "I've never seen so much go out the door like this and I don't know--screw it who cares. I'm talking you and me, *filthy* rich."

He stopped and knelt by her chair.

"You got an offer. And I have an offer. You need this offer. I *really* need this offer. So, you're going to accept the offer, so I can accept the offer. Ok?" His expression twisted into an unfamiliar guise.

Deb found his heavy-lidded eyes in the mirror. She held onto them for dear life.

"You trapped me inside a box and hung me."

"I made you glorious."

Deb attempted a scoff, it came out more like a snuffle. She wanted him away from her. Something in her face must have suggested it, because he began backing up.

“This is an opportunity. A real one.” He had almost reached the door. “Then, he paused. “I tried something new. It failed. I paid out of pocket for the damages to that box, you know.” He stopped. “*And* your hospital bills, don’t forget.”

“You fired Stan,” Deb said.

“Yes.”

“How long after?”

“Deb--”

“How long after he almost killed me did you fire him?” She asked, as piercingly as she could have wished.

“A month ago,” McCreedy said, and started to exit.

The door shut on his final words. “Don’t be a mouse, Deb; it doesn’t pay.”

Deb listened until his heavy tread made its way down the hallway and disappeared.

Then, she rose briskly. She had two hours until curtain up and she was going to use them.

#### ***Chapter 4: The Graveyard***

*“The reason we place all our healthcare clinics on upper floors is to make sure that people only seek healthcare when they truly need it. The extra effort required for people to ride all the way up two hundred plus floors guarantees that only those who legitimately require health interventions utilize our team’s assets. Additionally, we have found that the panoramic views provided by an upper floor environment assist in staff morale and patient responsiveness.”*

*-- Snippet from interview with Michael Ziegler, CEO of Plexigram (for all your replaceable innersole and hypertension needs) on purchasing Sunset Plaza’s penthouse*

“DEB,” Tom, her *Destiny Destination!* driver exclaimed, with all his usual verve.

“Hi Tom,” she said, sliding into the backseat of the dull pinkish car, the exterior of which was overlaid with the word *Destiny!* in various forms of pastel.

DD’s were notoriously expensive. The tempting minibar, nestled where the middle seat should be, automatically charged unsuspecting customers as soon as their fingerprints registered as having touched the outside of any bottle. There was also a massage feature (with a surcharge), and a button you could press that would expel gusts of wind into the vehicle, along with a light, loosely fitted helmet that would descend from the ceiling to protect styled hair from adverse effects.

Deb had received a discounted account with DD courtesy of the Checkerboard Theater. This month, they were putting on the surrealist musical, “The Long Hello,” in which Deb played a struggling mother whose third act suicide prompts the climactic duet between the romantic leads that *Explosion Theater Magazine* called “unconventionally unerotic.” The Checkerboard’s location, on the eighth floor of the Bernstein building, in a particularly congested part of midtown, was considerably faraway from The Albite Building. She had often arrived with seconds to spare before her cue. After four close-

calls, she expected a reprimand. Instead, the DD app had simply appeared on her phone, the first month already paid for. She felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment every time she caught sight of Tom edging around the corner.

He was usually the one driving her from theater to theater most nights, talking loudly above the privacy screen as she changed from one costume to the next. Tom was a jovial, slightly crooked man planted firmly in whatever moment he happened to be inhabiting.

“Early, isn’t it?” He asked.

“I programmed in the address. We’re not going to the usual places.” Deb watched as the little notification popped up on windshield.

“Alrighty-oh.” He sped off, automatically pressing the large white button underneath the CD player. The partition began to rise.

“I’m actually not getting naked for once.”

“Really?” He pressed it again. The partition lowered. “If I had known, I would’ve combed my hair.”

Deb laughed. “The back of your head is as lovely as ever.”

“Liar. I spotted a green hair somewhere yesterday. Yes, green! Not white, not grey. Green, Believe me?”

“Not even remotely.” Deb stretched out across the back and watched as Tom merged onto the busy highway.

She disliked driving along this stretch, further and further into the heart of the city. In front of them were eight lines of cars going, at most, ten miles an hour. Beside them, the horizon was forced upwards, as buildings grew like beanstalks. Structures

barely clearing a hundred floors were soon left behind, the more they drove and the slower their pace became. They rounded a long bend, and the highest skyscrapers appeared in close-up, blazing brightly in the sun. The Pencils could be seen even from here, the points of their tops peeking out above some of the blockier edifices. On the other side of the freeway, cars sped in the opposite direction on a nearly empty stretch of road. Deb envied them, watching the world expand and widen instead of constrict and lengthen.

Deb could recall driving this same route when there were barely any buildings that stretched higher than forty floors. She had been a lot smaller, too. The architectural shift had happened so suddenly, and yet was also, apparently, decades in the making. The news was particularly contradictory regarding how and why the urban design of the city had changed from a handful of skyscrapers surrounded by a variety of building shapes and sizes, to being dominated by colossal structures that now stood squeezed in beside each other. They were taller than ever, and thinner than ever, each floor owned by a different corporation. The holy grail: the penthouse. Every company wanted the penthouse, reserved for the executive offices of the company with the highest stock price and greatest net worth.

Deb had read a statistic stating that over the next five years, the space over any business existing on a ground level would be bought out. After the city had decided to tax for air space, companies were forced to build up to avoid getting charged without income. And with the new high tech elevator design, they balked at maintaining staircases, even for emergencies, arguing that the failure rate was so low, the loss of income from the wasted space on all the floors was much greater than the value of lost lives should the

elevators ever fail. There was even talk of terrifying pending legislation making the construction and maintenance of a staircase in every building up to “the discretion of a majority of the owners.” Her only comfort was that the more floors a building had, therefore the more companies existed within a single space, the harder it was for them to agree on anything. Deb had listened to her share of angry theater managers complain about some order to reassign parking spaces for the fourth time, or a terse email from corporate directing them to switch cleaning product brands at a moment’s notice.

“Where are we going?” Tom coughed a smoker’s cough.

“My agent’s building.”

“You have an agent? Like a real actor?”

Deb fiddled with the large black button below the door handle. It wasn’t labeled so she couldn’t tell if it was the message button or the one that generated wind. “I am a real actor.”

“Oh. I thought you were a prostitute.”

“You thought I was...a...prostitute?”

“Yeah, you know, changing into different outfits every thirty minutes, all the knives. People are into that now. I figured “Checkerboard Theater” was a front. He shrugged.

“I am NOT a prostitute.” She said with a catch of laughter.

“Okay,” he said simply.

She circled the edge of the shiny button with her index finger. She acted, so she was an actor. It didn’t feel much like her identity though, not like the identity of other actors she knew. What else was she? Certainly not a “mouse,” whatever that meant.



Mousy people had colorless hair and a timorous affect. Her hair had highlights, and she had just been mistaken for a prostitute. “Tom?”

“Uh huh?”

“How much is the massage feature?”

“Um...thirteen.” He hit the turn signal. “Water is ten, juice is twelve, wind is eleven, but the price goes up depending on the temperature,” he recited methodically. Then he glanced quickly back at her. “Discount doesn’t cover it.”

Deb thought for a moment, and then pressed down hard on the button beside her. Her hair immediately flew behind her shoulders as a forceful gust of wind was expelled out from somewhere.

“I’m gonna have to charge you,” Tom yelled over the noise.

“Charge me,” Deb yelled back, her shirtsleeves fluttering. Disregarding the dangling helmet that had automatically been released, she cranked up the pressure as high as it would go and closed her eyes.

She opened them when a hairpin turn caused her to jerk sideways. Tom had put up the partition, so she could only see out the side windows. Ahead of them was a street she didn’t recognize, one of the avenues that had been under construction since before she had started doing multiple shows a night. If those streets were accessible again, getting to The Checkerboard would certainly be made easier. The spanking new sidewalk was bustling; no surprise, as it was a quarter past when the upper floors got out of work. They slowed down to two miles an hour and began to crawl as Tom attempted to wave away one of the valets that dotted the corner waiting for new shoppers.

“Come on, man,” she heard him say a few times before the enthusiastic man backed away.

The people walking were doused in glaring, unnatural colors, as if dappled flood lights were shining down from above. Deb switched off the wind and spat errant bits of hair out of her mouth. Perhaps they had built new street lights during the renovation. But to what purpose? Everyone she saw looked ghastly underneath them, aged up at least ten years. Didn't these boulevards need people to *want* to stay? She had only been looking out straight ahead, but now she peered up into the garish hues as far she was able and let out an *oh*. Above was a booming barrage of images.

Small floating camera drones hung in front of each floor, projecting its interior onto giant, brightly lit screens; the sky had a thousand monstrous eyes. Every skyscraper all the way down the avenue was accompanied by the floating monitors. Deb hadn't yet seen these new innovations, just the commercials for them: animated machines winking at the camera while a voiceover proclaimed that they would make it possible to *see anything and everything, what's inside even the most elevated floor, on the sunniest afternoon, from the lowest position imaginable! (Coming soon to everywhere)*.

The giant projections stared down implacably, a window through which rows and rows of wares and the people browsing them was visible. Only the very top floors had no drones; the corporate offices. But you could barely see those darkened levels over the avalanche of exhibited products presented below them. From time to time the screens blinked, cutting to black for a moment before switching to an advertisement. The lower screens in front of the bottom floors blinked more often.

One whole floor appeared to be handbags of every imaginable variety. Above that were suits and wigs and the kinds of shampoos that came in glass bottles--familiar items for the 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. crowd. Then there were things that seemed to have no purpose. One of the more massive monitors displayed rows and rows of tiny glass elephants all standing in a row next to hand painted fans and little crystal dragons breathing silver fire. A gaggle of women stood fidgeting behind the row clutching dress bags from WearAbility and shoes from SixFeetOver, although most of their bodies were cut off, giving the impression of an array of pleated skirts on invisible hangers. The camera angle was obviously chosen to show off the knick knacks, not the people buying them. One of the glass elephants was a soothing shade of purple. There were multiple green and blue elephants that she could see, but only one that was purple. Its sleepy, crystal eyes peered at Deb over its curved trunk.

Deb had just decided that the purple elephant's eyes were set more widely than the others, which accounted for its appeal, when a wrinkled, white hand suddenly blocked them from her view. Obviously belonging to one of the skirted ladies, it hovered like a severed appendage for a moment, scanning over the whole row. Deb was conscious of a hope that it would choose the blue elephant, or the brown one. Instead, it snatched up the purple elephant by its trunk and disappeared with it. A salesperson hand flew down to fill the gap left in its place with a replacement elephant, grey this time.

The car continued to inch forward.

“EITHER, this is the biggest coincidence of all time, or you went to see the one palm reader in the city who's not bullshit.” Jerry surveyed Deb. She had just arrived at his office. For once, Dan, his underworked assistant whose job mostly consisted of

making up differing kinds of emergencies in case Jerry needed a quick escape, had ushered her in immediately.

Her agent of four years, Jerry, was a tiny, ill-dressed man with oversized, black-rimmed glasses who had a hands-on, perfectionistic approach to his job. He handled a lot of specialty clients, but the only other one she knew was Georgie, a gifted imitator who could emulate a person's mannerisms within five minutes of meeting them. She was the perfect understudy, lesser, but the same. Georgie had been Jerry's favorite client until the *Crumple* had started to get attention. After that, he showed Deb his true, ruthless competence with staggering rapidity. Since then, he had never let her go more than two weeks without a job. Deb was invariably more assured in his presence. And she was assured now.

"McCreedy showed up at the Regent" Deb said quickly, "Is it real?"

"Oh yeah," Jerry said. "It's real." He was chuffed.

"How much?" Deb swallowed.

Jerry told her.

"*FUCK*," Deb yelled. "Sorry." She clasped her hands over her mouth.

"You like golf?" Jerry asked.

"What?"

"I'm thinking of getting my own caddy." Jerry mused.

The rest of the time was spent in going over the contract, which all seemed perfectly normal excepting the lack of a stipulated end date. Deb signed on the spot, McCreedy be damned. It helped that Jerry kept repeating "*McCreedy be damned*," with every new initialing.

“Why do they want him specifically?” Deb asked, after she’d scrawled the last *DW*, and turned the final crisp page.

“He’s cheap.” Jerry stacked up the papers and started dialing a number. He glanced up, phone nestled in his shoulder. “--really cheap, I got a look at what they’re offering him.”

“Less than standard?”

“*Way less*,” Jerry mouthed; someone was talking on the other line. The squeaking voice paused. He rolled his eyes at the receiver. “Ira told me that McCreedy owes a LOT of money--hospital bills.”

“Which hospital?” Deb asked sharply, but Jerry wasn’t listening.

“Speckless Fresh needs a better ditty composer.” He hummed the tune as he moved the phone to his other shoulder. Sensing that he was done with her, Deb headed towards the door every step feeling more momentous than the last. It helped that as she exited, Dan was clapping.

“Where to now Miss Wrightly?” Tom feigned a bow as best he could given his cramped position.

Deb shut the door of the DD. She felt light all over. “Uh--”

“Back to the Regent?”

“No.” Deb felt that the occasion warranted something more.

She could visit Greg at work; he’d be ecstatic about the number. Deb was on the point of ordering Tom to drive to Fat n’ Stuffs when something in her recoiled at the idea. Perhaps she wasn’t sure how’d he react. But he was practical, the *most* practical, she argued with herself.

“Deb? We need to move or I’ll start getting fined”

She gave him an address.

G.F.C. Graveyard was situated behind one of the few public parks that had yet to be renovated. It was where her great-aunt was buried, the one she was named after. Tom pulled into a space beside a broken swing, and looked back at Deb furtively.

“Five minutes,” she said breezily, and clambered out of the car.

As she walked down the little hill, each row of headstones was clearly visible. She found the jugged-out stone she was looking for with ease, all the way down at the end of the second to last row, shaded by a tree dotted with turkey vultures.

The way Deb had heard it, Great-Aunt Deborah had run away from home in 1965 after graduating college; she stole all the china from the big, glass chest, and left a note saying she was getting married to an anarchist. Deb’s mother had admired her, although as the years passed, when she spoke of her, it would not take the form of veneration, but rather repeated inquiries as to whether the china, worth over a hundred thousand dollars, would eventually turn up. After a few years of that, Deb’s great-aunt morphed in her mind from a rebel, to a rich lady who was out there somewhere not sharing.

Great-Aunt Deborah and her magic china became one of Deb’s childhood fantasies. At first, they were simple; she’d turn up one day with an arm full of riches and cure her mother’s vicious nightmares. Then they got more complicated. Deb would run away from home and find Deborah and her husband performing jewelry heists. She’d join their life of crime as their small-boned secret weapon, and send diamond necklaces home with coded letters dusted in perfume. When Deborah died, the mystique did not. Deb circulated a rumor at her high school that the china was buried with her aunt, and dared

anyone brave enough to dig up the grave. Once, on Halloween, a group of them actually bought shovels and beers, stole someone's parent's car, and drove the considerable distance to fulfill the dare. They stood where Deb was standing now, half-laughing, half-scared, very young.

The grave was still intact, but Deb felt ancient. Deborah's name was barely visible anymore, due to years of weather damage. But she was here, underneath the grass and dirt. Deb bent over awkwardly, and rested her hand on the top of the stone. Visible in the distance, a fleet of small birds collided with the right side of a glass skyscraper and fell out of the sky, dead.

As if on cue, all the birds that had been chirping and ca-caw-ing in the brownish trees around her went silent. The sky was beginning to darken, too; a chill of fear ricocheted down Deb's spine. It took hold of her, and she removed her hand from the grave shamefully. She would never be Great-Aunt Deborah; she would never be brave.

The word *mouse* came back to her, like an unscratchable itch. She'd heard variations on that theme her whole life, each composer adding their own flavor to the melody. She was too quiet, too amenable, too afraid of being disliked to stand up for herself. *Stop being timid* (it was her mother's voice now) *Who cares if they think you're rude? Argue, argue, argue. Don't let them win.* "They" was the landlord, or the shoe repair guy, or the phone company, or a seventh floor department store. It was an abstract "They," an idea of whatever unjustness happened to be pounding on the door at that moment. Deb never fought it. What was the point? This was something her mother had tried long and hard to teach her, the point of fighting a losing battle. She had failed

miserably, ending Deb's lessons with a weary truth: "Sweetie, you don't have the personality to tackle this world."

Fear was the benchmark by which all Deb's other traits were judged. She was nice; that's what everyone said. But was she truly a nice person, or did she merely act like one because she was afraid of people thinking that she wasn't nice? Deb agonized over that question. More than anything, she was afraid of people. How they could hurt. How they could judge. How they could lie. If she screwed up and hurt them, how they could hurt her back, and in what ways. Naming her after Great-Aunt Deborah was an insult. Deborah was obviously without fear, running away with a man she'd met only months previously, leaving behind family, money, security. Deborah was the heroine in some grandiloquent period novel adapted by the DBC. Her first husband probably died--no, was shot for speaking out against some corrupt body, and Deborah took up the cause in his stead. In the second half of the limited series, she would have a couple of exciting brushes with death, a new romance, and a couple kids. Then, she'd die peacefully with no regrets, the china from her father's house remaining unsold in her bedside drawer, a reminder of the life she gave up, and a symbol of her strength. Deb could practically see the opening credits.

A hacking cough rang out from somewhere; Deb glanced up to see two elderly men gently placing daisies on a fresh grave. They were linked arm in arm, supporting what weight two heavy duty canes were unable to bear. One of them began to cry big, milky tears. The other patted him on the back, adjusted his sunhat, and spoke to him in soft, croaking tones, his eyes never leaving the shining flowers. Their grieving was



beautiful, soulful, right. As usual, Deb was in the wrong. She turned silently and began to trek back up the hill, towards Tom, light, life.

### *Chapter 5: Sunset Plaza*

*For those long shifts with no time for meal breaks, try Lean Look Appetite Suppressing Spray. Just one squirt, and you're guaranteed relief from hunger pangs for up to six hours!*

For the past two years, Deb's life mostly consisted of stairs: getting up, getting down, how much time it took to do either. It made each day a little more mundane. But now her life was altered. No more running from theater to theater each night. She was about to start rehearsals for her own one-woman show: *The Wrightly Way to Die*. She was about to be paid more than she ever thought she would be. She was about to conquer her claustrophobia because, well...there was really nothing to be scared of anymore.

It turned out she was wrong about that last part.

"STOP." Deb sprinted out of the elevator just before the doors were about to close. She doubled over on the thin carpet, her hands on her knees, her chest heaving. She had come to the Trawley Building on 9th street for her gum and Greg's hand sanitizer. The general store was on the fifth floor. When she veered away from the stairs, against habit, she had veered confidently. But as soon as she stepped inside the elevator, the walls undulated and took on the glossy, far away quality that meant her chest was about to close. And she was done for.

"DAMMIT." Her bag slid onto her wrist. She worked on normalizing her halted breaths. Luckily, the lobby was empty. She was so tired of trying.

"I'll get them later," Greg said, without looking up, referring to the items she had so heroically volunteered to pick up less than an hour ago.

Deb threw down her bag and sat across from him at the foot of the table.

"Rehearsals start tomorrow! What if the theater is on the fiftieth floor!"

“What theater is on the fiftieth floor? It’s for the lay people remember?”

“The guy who owns the theater is a big deal.” Deb was annoyed that he still wasn’t looking up from his mystery novel. “He has a lot of pull. And a lot of cash.”

“It’s still a *theater*,” Greg said, “don’t freak.” He chuckled at something Lord Peter Wimsey said to Harriet Vane.

There was silence.

“My first check comes in two weeks,” she said, significantly.

He turned a number of pages, obviously looking for a specific scene. “Good for you.”

Feelings and retorts chased each other around inside her. She wasn’t sure whether he was being serious or sarcastic. Eventually, she settled for standing up slowly, and then moving even more slowly out of the room, in case he would: a) give her more ammo to start a real fight, or b) convey some kind of real appreciation and happiness for her and her new job. He did neither.

In the morning, she was still vaguely unsettled. But she ignored it, at least for the moment. This was a big moment. Sunset Plaza was one of the more imposing skyscrapers she’d passed so many times on her trips back and forth to and from various theaters. It was notable for its strikingly chalky steps that stretched out a long ways in front of the building, like what you expect to find at the entrance of a museum. Deb ambled up the palatial stairs one at a time. She was over an hour early. When she reached the top, the revolving glass door was still spinning from the person who had passed through it before her.

“How may I help you?” The effortlessly chic woman at the desk addressed Deb before she had fully crossed the airy lobby.

“Uh...” Deb realized she didn’t know the name of the theater. Or the name of the CEO who had built the theater. Or anything really, except, “I’m Deborah Wrightly?”

“Down the hall and to your left,” the woman gestured.

“Is that where the elevator is?” Deb had previously looked around the airy lobby and had found no elevator.

“No,” the woman looked bored, “down the hall and to your left is where the theater is.”

“The whole theater?” Deb was afraid to be overjoyed.

“Yes.” The woman contemplated her nails, and then the silent phone. “The whole theater.”

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Deb gushed.

She almost ran down the hall, then turned left, almost colliding with McCreedy.

“Watch it!” He took a heavy step back, through the wide, heavy hinged door, and into their new home.

When the lights came on, there was a moment of foreboding. All self-created, of course; she knew that. Still, Deb half-expected to be greeted by one of those stock, toady little corporate men she’d learned to be so afraid of as a child, full of apologies and cancellations. Instead, it was worse.

An ear-splitting shriek, a woman in an ill-fitting pinkish jumpsuit, a woman hugging her, a woman pledging undying fandom, a woman jumping up and down; Deb frozen.

“Oh no--oh NO--I’m so sorry, Ms. Wrightly, I did NOT want to be one of those crazed fans annoying you. I’m sure you get that a lot. Are you all right?” Amazingly, it was only one woman who had created the gale.

McCreedy gingerly pulled her off of Deb by the sleeve of her jumpsuit. “She’s fine, Miss...?”

“Lottie,” Lotti replied. “Are you sure? She’s gone pale. Like, in books when someone has a shock and they go pale.”

“She’s fine, Lottie,” McCreedy said gruffly. “I’m sure.” He steered her towards the door.

“Well, tell her I’m Lottie and I do this floor so she’ll be seeing me sometimes, I hope. Oops.” The last part was in regards to a large mop and other cleaning supplies that Lottie had abandoned on her way towards the door. She ran over to gather them before exiting with a little embarrassed wave to Deb, her cheeks bright red.

When the door had shut, Deb breathed.

“What the hell was that?” McCreedy asked.

“I’m fine.” Deb said quickly.

“Look, as tempting as it is, you can’t be a shit to your fans. Word gets around.”

Deb hoped she was emitting a chilly silence.

Then, as one, actor and director turned to survey the theatre. And it was...fine.

“Big,” Deb said.

“Smaller than our last one,” McCreedy said.

“More rows,” Deb said.

“Bad color scheme,” McCreedy said.

“High ceiling,” Deb said.

“Oh no. Not good. Will it make you faint?”

“I’m afraid of elevators...dick.”

“What was that last part?”

“Nothing.” Deb was sure she’d whispered it.

“Hmm...” McCreedy looked amused. “how disappointing.”

They got to work.

“--AND then you do another Crumple downstage, and I’ll have the composer do some sort of string accompaniment to represent the fleeting moment of passing from this world to the next--*GET OUT*,” the last words McCreedy shouted backwards at the door that had suddenly swung open. “This is a *CLOSED* rehearsal.”

Deb raised her head from where it had been lying; stage left, by the armchair McCreedy had pulled up onto the stage to stand in for the empty doorway she would pass through to reach Death (the word felt capitalized every time McCreedy uttered it). They had been going over the broad strokes of the show, or the “ninety minute expiration exploration,” as McCreedy put it. He liked alliteration. He did *not* like interruptions during rehearsal. He motioned furiously with one hand for whoever had opened the door to leave. Judging from his expression, they wouldn’t. Deb turned her head as far as she was able without seriously altering her position.

At least twenty people jostled each other in the doorway. “We’re here for the rehearsal,” a disembodied voice said from amidst the throng. Others joined in with sounds of assent.

“Ah!” McCreedy reversed the hand movement so that it beckoned. “You must be my tech people. We were just getting in some early stage time. Is the stage manager here yet?”

“You McCreedy?” A different voice called. “We’re the orchestra.” The voice had a lazy inflection.

“Orchestra?” Deb sat up, and looked properly.

A horde began to pour into the theater.

They introduced themselves by title, speaking over each other which made it impossible for Deb to make out all of their jobs; she just caught snippets: “Cello.” “Guitar.” “Violin.” “Percussion.” “Lights.” “Maintenance.” “Wardrobe.” “Installation.” “Stagehand.” “Assistant.” “Second Stagehand.” “Assistant’s Assistant.” They just kept coming, more people than Deb had ever seen work on a single show. “Costume.” “Technical Supervisor.” “Piano.” “First violin.” “Personal assistant.”

McCreedy had enough. “Hold it.” He could be extremely commanding when he chose. There was a pause. People were still coming through the door. The ones already inside had filed into the front two rows and were beginning to sit down. They stared up at Deb, still balanced on her forearm, legs splayed out across the stage. And she stared at them. “Two, no *three* violins?” McCreedy continued, “Installation?” He gave an astonished little laugh, “We’re not doing any installations.”

“Are you sure?” The woman apparently in charge of installations asked.

“Yes,” McCreedy said, taken aback.

“It’s only the first day. You can’t be sure yet.” The woman pushed on. Sounds of agreement rippled down the row.

“This is a showcase...a...ninety minute--expiration exploration,” McCreedy said it proudly. “This is raw, real. NO installations.”

“Just in case, then.” The woman said definitively. She pushed through the others, dragging a small cart on which several pieces of electronic equipment and two sturdy computers were balanced.

“Just...in...case.” McCreedy turned away from them and flashed Deb a grin that was half shock and half greed. She knew then that he wasn’t going to argue. The woman had questioned his authority, and would have been immediately fired if they were standing in the Regent. But they weren’t. Instead, they were standing in a place that, apparently, had room for uselessness in its budget. McCreedy loved it.

Deb had more mixed feelings. Yes, the theater had a pit like most of the theaters she'd worked in, but they were more like emergency axes encased in glass: always there, never used. A soundboard and one guy to operate it was the cost-effective standard. It was what she was used to. And now a full orchestra was blinking up at her, their eyes wide. Although, were the eyes wide, or just young? She surveyed them. On average, the people looked to be at least four years younger than her, judging by the tell-tale smooth skin at the corners of their eyes. Even looking from such a sharp angle, she could see it. Tech supervisors and sound guys were old, graying even; it was a dead-end job filled by people who were at the *dead end*. These people were still young enough to try. What on earth were they doing here?

Deb’s face must have communicated her confusion, because McCreedy jerked his head to signal for her to leave the stage. She supposed he was salivating to deliver his



opening day speech to the largest audience he'd ever been given the opportunity to posture in front of.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he stepped to the middle of the stage. "I'd like to begin with a story, to show the way I approach my art, and what I will expect from all of you in service of that art. When I was a boy--" she could repeat the damn thing from memory, "my father liked to take me to the theater as a reward if I'd had five whole days of being good. I approach each one of my productions in the hope of recreating the magic I felt then, as my father held my candy-stained little hand--"

Deb slinked into the wings thankfully.

As rehearsals continued, she felt as though she was slinking everywhere, just to avoid the populace. Like the "installation woman," most of the people who showed up at the theater day after day seemed to have no function. They sat in those same front rows silently, or talked amongst themselves, or read their phones. The orchestra learned the new composition in a day, and the lighting people had grasped McCreedy's cues just as quickly. How could they not? It was a simple one-woman show. At least the assistants were always running around doing errands, but even those were mostly contrived by McCreedy. He'd send one out for coffee and another for tea, and then a third for ginger shots in tiny glass bottles. He was clearly enjoying himself, and also clearly didn't understand why Deb wasn't enjoying herself likewise. But she didn't get her satisfaction from that kind of power.

Worse, soon she wasn't getting her satisfaction from much of anything.

"FOR FUCK'S SAKE DO I HAVE TO LOCK YOU IN A BOX AGAIN?"

Deb shuddered. Someone giggled. McCreedy pounded something on the floor. Deb sat up slowly from her semi-spread eagle position. He was kneeling beside her, gripping one of the thirty daggers by the tip, and pressing the base into the stage.

“Well?” McCreedy’s voice still shook, but the tone was calmer.

“I almost had it.” Deb was robotic.

“Had what?” McCreedy sighed. “I felt nothing. There was no connection, no emotion. You were nothing.”

“Nothing,” Deb repeated. She clutched both knees into her chest.

Before her, fifty pairs of eyes locked onto the drama. It was the only time they ever paid any attention to her.

“Deborah--”

Deb winced. She hated it when he called her that.

“You need to make me feel--to make *them* feel.” He gestured towards imaginary theatergoers. “Otherwise you’re just falling over thirty times.” He played with the dagger, tossing it up and then catching it in a way that made her want to scream. “If you were funny, that would be one thing--but you’re not,” he said severely. “Right now the audience can go to a mini mall on half-off day for all kitchen appliances and get the same show.” He crouched down until they were at eye level. “What do you need?”

“An audience,” Deb said, gazing down at the rows of people who barely qualified as witnesses.

McCreedy appeared to accept this. “You’ll get one.”

When he moved back, Deb caught a whiff of some new spray, venomous lilies.

A few nights later, Deb made a grave error. She was almost finished packing up for the night, when she realized that she had taken longer than usual. She left the green room and turned right, away from the exit, cautiously making her way backstage. The place was empty. McCreedy was gone; the orchestra and assistants and tech people and the installation lady who kept loudly tampering with her equipment during run-throughs, they were all gone. She was standing in a vacant theater, her vacant theater (sort of), where she had a perfect right to remain for however long she wanted. So she put down her bag and skipped up to the stage, prop knife in hand, to begin the second act. Just for herself. She had just crumpled to the floor, perfectly, for the first time in weeks, when a soft “*OH*” emitted from somewhere quite close. Deb sat up and swung her legs around to see Lottie sitting cross-legged in the front row, mop in hand. Well, she was right about needing an audience.

“Sorry,” Lottie blurted out, “Didn’t mean to disturb--” The sentence trailed off.

“S’okay,” Deb got out, in between scrambling down the steps and towards the exit before Lottie could tell her that her sister or brother or aunt had lately killed themselves with steak knives in her honor.

“Wait,” Lottie said loudly.

Deb halted, one foot hovering. Manners were instilled in her far too deeply for her liking. She turned.

“I just want to say, *we* just want to say, some of the other staff and me, I mean,” she cleared her throat, “we want to thank you for what you do. It’s beautiful.” She stood up, digging the handle side of the mop into the floor.

“Thank you,” Deb said, before realizing that the correct response was, “You’re welcome.” She wasn’t sure what she was thanking Lottie for. She had no idea why she was being thanked in the first place.

“I guess you’re wondering why we’re thanking you at all huh?” Lottie smiled sheepishly.

A laugh burst from Deb. “Sorry, it’s just...you did that thing my roommate does. I mean, not with your own sentence but with mine--.” She stumbled trying to describe Greg’s propensity for finishing his thoughts aloud. But it comforted her a little. “Yes,” she finally said. “I have no idea why you’re thanking me.”

Before Lottie could answer there was a loud ring. Lottie snapped a flip phone out of her belt and answered it excitedly. “Hi, Daphne...yeah! I’m with her right now. She’s really nice.” She winked at Deb. “I told her. *Yes*, I told her. No, I’m not bullshitting. Her hair is kinda reddish.” She mouthed *sorry*. “No. No. YES. No. Okay, bye.” She hung up. “That was Daphne, she does the fifth floor.”

“Oh,” Deb said politely.

Lottie flung her blonde ponytail behind her shoulder and made as if to begin vacuuming. “Gotta keep to my schedule,” she said, giving Deb an opportunity to exit.

“Lottie...” Deb was halfway to the door. Lottie turned around with a huge smile. “I’ll get you tickets?” It was all she could offer.

“So kind of you, Miss Wrightly. But I don’t see how.” Lottie spoke definitively.

“There aren’t gonna be any tickets. Just invitations.”

“Invitations?”

“That string-bean CEO is sending out personal invitations. I saw them when I was dusting the computer--nice lettering.” Then the vacuum was turned on. Its screech followed Deb out the door and all the way home.

That night, it was her usual nightmare.

She crouched inside a small, wooden box, waiting to die. It smelled of something horrific that worsened as the box began to be hoisted up ever so slowly. Sounds began to emerge, *can-can-can--light--right* and then--*snap--* The last sound didn't come from above. Everything broke; she was falling. She fell and fell and fell in complete silence which meant she wasn't screaming. That came later.

*Crunch*

*Crunch*

*CRUNCH.*

“Gaarrh,” Deb's eyes flew open.

“You were yelling again,” Greg said matter of factly, eating another chip. He was sitting calmly in the chair across from her bed, on top of the embroidered crimson dress she had carefully laid out the night before.

“I told you to wake me up.” Deb slammed her head down on the pillow repeatedly.

“I thought you'd hit me.” His face fell, and his eye gave a particularly large twitch. “Hey, what's the fancy outfit for?”

“Costume,” she mumbled.

“You said you can't bring costumes home.”

“You can when you're the star.”

“Oh, the *staaarrrr*,” he waltzed out of the room repeating the word in a sing-song way, “*The staarr, the staaarrrrrr.*”

“Shut up,” Deb said, without effort. Her eyes were so heavy. And she had just lied. Turning over, she fell back into darkness.

She crouched inside a small, wooden box, waiting to die....

### ***Chapter 6: Almack's***

*Submitter: Patronesses@Almacks.social.corp*

*Topic: Nomination Declined*

*Receiver: CEO@263.sunsetplz.corp*

*Please be advised that your floor's nominated representative for this week's Almack's Assembly has been respectfully declined by at least one Patroness. You have until noon tomorrow to nominate an alternate representative for this week's supper. Note that this week's event has Very Special Entertainment, courtesy of our own Stephen Heyer (Floor 1). As usual, doors close at 8:00 p.m.*

Deb pulled the top of her dress sharply downwards, exposing a nude bra strap, then back up, then down, then up again. Was it too crimson? Did it wash her out? Her face was flushed from the jittery beat of her heart. Maybe her hair was too high, or her heels were too low. She was used to seeing herself in the mirror. Taking off costumes and putting them back on. She was used to staring at her left eye (smaller than her right one) the uneven curve of her nose, the round lips that went in and out of fashion. She was used to knowing who, besides herself, would be examining these attributes: a director or an audience member or a blind date, a person she whose role she recognized. Today, she knew she would recognize no one.

She was going to a party. The invitation had come by email, via a large attachment. *You are cordially invited to attend Friday evening's supper at Almack's Assembly on the fourteenth floor of Sunset Plaza. Black Tie. As always, doors close promptly at 8:00 p.m. Come or else.* The last demand was not stated, but implied in the address from which the invitation came: Stephen Heyer's personal email. From it, she'd learned that Heyer was the person who owned the first floor of the Plaza and thereby the theater. Deb had never expected to actually meet him. He was her boss's boss's boss's boss's boss's boss. And they were going to a party.

The car came at 6:15 p.m. It was black, shiny, a C-level car with tinted windows. Deb tucked herself inside, careful not to snag or scratch. The driver threw a half-lit cigarette out the window and turned to greet her with a morbid stare. Her fingers curled into themselves, followed by her toes. She reached sideways and opened the fridge, bigger than the one in Tom's DD. Doing so illuminated the shadow of a person sitting at the other end of the car, a very tall person. Deb shut the door with a snap.

"Miss Wrightly." It was a statement; there was a hand to shake. Deb shook it.

"Deb, please," she said, to a sandy-haired, long-faced man with horn-rimmed glasses. It had to be Mr. Heyer.

A phone rang. Mr. Heyer answered it. Someone on the other end was speaking quickly. He spoke faster, in clipped, robotic sentences. His eyes darted back and forth as he spoke, like he was watching the words go by. Just as the effect became mesmerizing, he hung up and turned to Deb with a smile that reached for sheepish. "My daughter. She's trying too hard for my approval. I guess all daughters are like that, huh?"

Deb knew how to respond. "I was." Good. Father/daughter dynamic. Safe. He nodded.

"I want you to know that my business is a team effort. You're part of that team now, in the starting position. And we're so excited that you've come aboard." This time he grinned.

His teeth were actually pearly.

"I'm very excited too, sir."

"Stephen. Deborah, tonight I want to introduce you to some of my colleagues. And some of my enemies." He laughed. Deb laughed too late. "No, no, just professional



rivalries, of course. Almack's sucks everyone in. I met George Stanway there once. You know, the hotel guy? Bought the whole building on 6th and built up from a motel, to a mid-price hotel, to a residency hotel, to a million dollar suite? Genius. All the price options packed into one tower. He was tiny in person. Almost a midget. Anyway," his phone pinged, and he began to answer a text, "a lot of them have theaters, but none of them have a star." The texting got more furious.

Deb tried to find the correct response. Heyer's spidery fingers kept typing. For the first time, she noticed how he was dressed. A dark suit with a dark tie and a heavy ring on his index finger. The head of an animal tattoo peaked deliberately out of his collar. Its jaws smiled wide.

They sped up, weaving through early evening traffic as the sun slowly set behind them. Heyer looked up from his phone only once, when Deb crossed her legs towards him, causing a silver heel to glint in the single beam of light that streaked across the back seat. His eyes passed coldly over the shoe like an appraiser judging value. "*The Russian clock that you thought was the property of the royal family is actually a fake, and only worth about 30 US dollars.*" Then, once they'd done enough damage, the heavy lids returned to the tiny screen, and the fingers began their attack once more. Her skin burned. She resisted criss-crossing her legs underneath her billowing skirt to cocoon.

They stood in front of the elevator; Heyer, even taller than he'd appeared tucked inside the back of the limo (spindlier too), rocking slightly back and forth on the balls of his feet; Deb, a statue, dying to run. Faintly, a guard's voice could be heard on a walkie talkie. She had noticed at least five security vans in the parking garage, along with a couple of official lawyer cars (the only non-black vehicles). These strikingly cerulean

blue cars had become more common recently. Most people could now distinguish a lawyer car siren from an ambulance siren.

The numbers flashed downwards warningly. Heyer careened forward and backward with more urgency, his hands waving at his sides like an inflatable balloon man in front of a car dealership. Deb had a destructive urge to poke him, to gleefully pop all the air out of him until it was he who crumpled to the floor. *Ding!* The doors opened. Heyer flapped his way inside.

“I’d rather walk,” she choked out.

“Uh. Huh.” The doors were closing. He was back on his phone. As they snapped shut, she heard him say. “Wait, fourteen floors? You’ll look like a--”

She fled.

Fourteen floors later, she looked like the princess after her sprint from the prince: sweaty, ball gown crooked, hairpins sticking out. Before her stood a steel door barring what sounded like a multitude of voices in the key of chit chat. She tweaked the dress to the left, pushed the pins back in, put the heels back on, and took a deep breath: four seconds in, four seconds out. *You are fine, you are fine, it’s going to be fine, nothing bad will happen.* Mantras were good in situations like this. *You are fine, you are fine, it’s going to be fine.* It got hazier the more she repeated it.

*You are fine, it’s going to be fine, nothing bad will happen.* Didn’t this used to work? *You are fine, you are fine, you are fine, you are fine, you are not fine and your armpits smell.* Other people had better mantras, more specific. Greg had one about balling up socks. She tried to think of a different one. *You are fine, you are fine, nothing bad will happen, your neck hasn’t started to loosen and they make a cream for that*

*anyway. You are fine, nothing bad will happen, you are in a wide, wide, open space on solid ground and there's a nice ocean breeze* oh screw it. The door looked heavy. Was she even strong enough to open it? Deb turned the handle and pushed. It gave way only an inch. Panicking, she threw her body weight against it with all the force she had. It flew open abruptly, and she toppled into the room.

When she landed, she grew. Not literally, of course, but the carpeting was so thick and luscious that it gave her a good half an inch on her regular height. That was the first thing she registered. And then the room...she could only gape.

It was slanted. From where she stood, the floor curved upwards just enough that it was noticeable. At the top was an empty dance floor, shiny and new. The ceiling remained level, so that as the floor began to rise, the whole thing appeared to contract. If she were to walk forward, she'd feel herself getting taller and taller until she was a giant, leering down at whoever stood where she stood now.

Once she had established the dimensions of the space, she allowed her eyes to travel around the room, to see its inhabitants. And what people!

At first, she thought they were dancing, because heads (or head pieces when it came to the women) seemed to be bobbing up and down jerkily. But the motion had no rhythm, forming a wave like pattern that began at the opposite end of the room from Deb, the high end, and ended a few feet in front of her. A man had walked that path, a startling man. He was startling not only because he was very short, and very ugly, and wore an enormous flower in his buttonhole that tickled one of his many chins, but because he had the strangest, longest, thinnest fingers Deb had ever seen. They were interlaced together at his stomach, anguilliform protrusions that extended out unnaturally from his knuckles,

ending only when wrist met forearm. As he traversed the length of the room, his head remained upright, but his eyes flitted to the face of each person who bowed to him. This man finally halted before three ladies in matching muted gowns that closed up to the throat standing shoulder to shoulder. Deb, positioned well behind them, could clearly see the man nod his head in acknowledgement the way all the others had done before him. She was unable to see the faces of the women, but judging by the man's expression, they responded positively.

Deb felt something cold. She raised her arm; her hand was holding something: a long-stemmed, chilled glass, filled with caramel colored liquid. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the back of a waiter's head bob briskly away from her into the crowd. She hoped the kid was moonlighting as a pickpocket. Deb took a sip of the drink, and then another, to taste it more. Warmth gently made its way back inside her body; the picture before her became a little more tangible. The door to the stairs was still ajar behind her, she shut it quickly before anyone had a chance to notice. Just like the staircase at The Regent, it blended into the wall so that when she stepped back, the room became a closed oval. With that, the whole thing tilted even further before her eyes. Rocked off balance, she tried to focus on anything else. Various words were drifting into her ears. She began to listen.

“...don't much care for the fish.”

“Now, how did your team get the curls to one side? The layer cake effect?”

“Dead dad trumps ultrasound, you know. My father can't fire his own ashes out of a cannon into the fucking Pacific.”

“Table six is full of loudmouths, a couple fresh reps from below 200.”

“Jeffrey looking like a frog, as usual.”

“Could this stuff be any less alcoholic?--witches are really on a power trip.”

“I know, honey, I’m sorry. But you’re not on any of the boards yet, and you decided not to be religious.”

“Beth is an atheist!”

“A *devout* atheist, sweetie.”

This last exchange was carried out by two women in mermaid style gowns, huddled closest to Deb. Thankfully, their appearances were nothing too frightening, Deb measured her dress against each of theirs, and found it to be an acceptable level of lesser. She was prepared for lesser. Interestingly, their outfits both seemed to be made out of the same material, something immeasurably supple and soft that Deb couldn’t place. She did know, however, that her own dress was a cotton/roly blend: 14% to 86% to be exact. The two women pivoted, and Deb got a better look at what she assumed was a statement necklace on the left one: a wide, pale blue collar, with decorative fins extending out from it either side to evoke the real thing. The woman wearing it, the one who’d exclaimed about “Beth,” stood in a way that could only be described as artistic; chunky heeled feet tightly crossed, front knee bent, both arms clasped behind her so as to throw out her chest, head inclined at an angle that allowed one loose, chestnut curl to catch the light. Deb saw a bead of sweat form at her temple, presumably from the effort of holding the position. The woman was amazing enough to warrant a name. Deb decided to call her “Fins.” The older woman next to her was looking down at Fins patronizingly. She refused to lean over to hear what she was saying, so rather than alter her posture, Fins spoke

louder, casting furtive glances around as she did so. Deb guessed that all the people they kept referring to were in this room.

Heyer's head could be seen somewhere in the distance, his weedy frame stooped over, his lips brushing someone's ear. Then he straightened up, surveying the room as he unfurled. Deb felt his eyes on her neck and emptied her glass.

"...got mouse ears, don't she--*doesn't* she."

"--telling that cruise ship story for the 100th time; no, no he's mouthing along. Can't see anyway--yeah, was supposed to fix her, made her blind as a bat. "

"Have you seen his collection of eyeglass cases? All the men have gotten quite competitive-- ahah! Yes, silly isn't it."

"The 100-200 tables are quiet tonight."

"She's always been a little vamp. The hooker."

"Are you the actress?"

Deb was being addressed. It was Fins, who, alongside the other woman, had turned towards Deb expectantly. Incredibly, Fins did so without seriously altering her stance.

"106," Fins said, by way of introduction.

"202," said the other, louder, as Deb was still standing at a distance.

"1?" Deb said with the inflection of a question, guessing they were meant to say their floor numbers. She took a step towards them, wobbling slightly on the carpeting. She was glad she hadn't made the mistake of introducing herself with something as apparently worthless as her name.

“I knew it! I said, now that's an artist. Off to the side, looking us all over.” Fins, or 106, gave a tinkling laugh.

“Oh no, I wasn't--”

“You should!” 202 joined in with a heartier laugh. “High time someone else got a turn. We can recognize each other by the backs of our hands by now.” She took up Deb's hand and clutched it. “Yours is perfectly smooth.”

Deb felt unfamiliar, velvety skin pressing down on half-healed scratches and paper cuts, and the leathery places where her palm met her fingers. Looking on, 106,--- no, she had to remain “Fins”--Fins' smile twitched along with her bulging arms, still wrenched behind her in invisible handcuffs.

“We're very much looking forward to your performance.” 202 said, with a comforting air. “I told Stephen, I said, *I'll be the one in line passing out tissues*. And then he made some joke about people who cry, you know how funny he is. I mean,” she dropped her voice conspiratorially, “he has to be, first floor and all. A year ago he was just a rep from floor 53, and at his height...without the girth to balance--well--he's gotta fall back on the charm offensive.”

“And you love it when they do.”

“Hush.” The women laughed together. Deb laughed, too. It was a laugh that happened in stages, long enough for Deb to deconstruct everything they'd said and piece it back together, with no more comprehension than she'd had at the start. There was some underpinning she couldn't see. Her hand was still being tightly gripped.

“My nephew is working in your orchestra. Chad? First violin?” 202 said with a confiding air.

“Really?” Fins gasped, her hand flew to her mouth. “I thought he played guitar! My Elena is the set dresser.” She served that information towards Deb, and then turned back to 202. “And Sharon’s son, the tall one, not the balding one, is a *sound guy*.” She laughed the same laugh, delighted at her use of the term. “All those camps were for something I suppose.”

“106, 202,” someone male, older, with nicely graying hair that curled upwards in waves, nodded to each of them as he spoke. “You’re not keeping the poor woman hostage, are you? She’s never been here before.” He stepped into what became a perfect circle, the women taking up new positions in space with practiced ease. Following their lead, Deb was able to also detach her hand.

“Jerry!” Fins exclaimed. Then, her eyes widened, and she embarked on a different kind of louder laugh, as if to draw attention from what she had just uttered.

“306,” Jerry introduced himself. He cast Fins a quick, blighting glance before refocusing on Deb. “I’m so looking forward to your show tomorrow night.”

“1,” she replied to Jerry, glad to have a name to hang onto. She stuck out her hand.

For one excruciating moment, it hung there. They stared at it, a frozen tableau waiting to be painted, or sketched by a crime scene artist: victim, perpetrator, two shocked bystanders veering away. And then it passed. She lowered her hand.

“100-200 may as well be pronounced D.O.A.,” Jerry continued, looking past Deb as though nothing had happened.

“Marge doesn’t like the room, you know that. With her vertigo...”



“She should take it up with the Patronesses. I don’t like to look at hangdogs unless I’m about to feed them.”

Fins said something faux reprimanding in response, but the words began to fade out, replaced by the thundering of humiliation. It tingled. The short man with the extraterrestrial fingers was making his way closer and closer. If Deb could somehow get a handshake wrong, she was certainly not equipped to perform any kind of bow. Thinking fast, she started to cough. It built spectacularly from a delicate hem, to full on hacking, with a slight choking quality thrown in for good measure. It was an indelicate escape.

“Oh honey, are you alright? Yes, the spread is by the window. Which kind of water do you prefer? I said *which kind of water?* Poor dear can’t speak.”

“Saline water twice daily,” Jerry called.

“No, No, vitamin C and lots of spinach.”

“Can you take that in a Neti pot? For god sakes, the vitamin C. You know, mix it with my normal electrolytes?”

And then Deb was out of earshot.

More people were arriving, sweeping through the double doors and bowing their heads before the three women still standing in a row. Should she circle back and follow their lead? No, the specificity of the bow remained a mystery. Each neck managed to incline for the same amount of time, but at slightly different angles. Even the professional section of the CSB Theater company hadn’t managed that feat by the end of Mary Peter’s seven day bowing intensive (they had been deep in rehearsals for *The Queen’s Sacrifice*). Deb thought of Georgie, Jerry’s other client, the one person she’d stayed in contact with

from CSB, and winner of last year's Golden Parrot for excellence in pastiche. Only Georgie could have a hope of imitating this...genuflect.

In fact, there was a woman about Georgie's height, and with her same jet black hair tinged with purple, standing by the long refreshments table. She was eating some sort of nondescript beige square. Instinctively, Deb grew closer, and found that the table was covered in fanned out pieces of what looked to be deflated pound cake, flanked by lines of ultra thin cookies in black, white, and red, all with the same flower patterns around the edge, and arranged in descending height order to resemble poker chips. The design did little to make the food more appetizing. The Georgie lookalike turned her head and swallowed, a piece of hair getting loose from her braided updo and slinking down her back. Was that her same heart tattoo behind her left ear? Her lips? Her...face.

"Deb." Georgie said without surprise.

"Georgie?"

"Here." Georgie picked up a square and proffered it to Deb with no room for refusal.

"Mmmhh," Deb worked hard to chew fast. It was...stale? Maybe her palate was insufficiently advanced.

"Drink your drink," Georgie said. "It helps to wash it down."

Maybe not. Deb took a sip from the glass that, again, had appeared in her left hand. Her eyes met Georgie's. "What are you doing here?"

"I got married." She said, without emotion.

"Oh," Deb said, blown blackwards about a hundred years.

“This party blows,” Georgie said aggressively. Her eyes widened wickedly. “I saw you try to shake hands with Jerry. That’ll keep me in stitches for a week.”

“Glad to be of help,” Deb said, with a hint of ire.

“300 and above don’t shake anymore; it’s the new thing.”

“Great.” The ire was clearer now.

“What are you, 1?”

“I guess,” Deb ate another bland square. And then another. “What are you?”

“Nothing!” Georgie laughed. “But I’m with 279. Bad number right? Lucrative natural gas company, though.” She gave a little gasp, eyes fixed on something to Deb’s right. “Mermaid in the house! Oh noo...”

It had to be Fins. Deb almost felt concern for her.

“Now that is try-hard. Look at that collar...” Georgie’s horror-stricken expression turned to pity. “She’s 106. The corp sells Russian nesting dolls that talk, but the mechanics are shit, so they mostly come out broken.”

Deb changed the subject. “Who’s the hus--who’s 279?”

“He’s over there somewhere, Freddie. Really, really blonde hair. Too blonde. I convinced him to bleach it more yesterday as a joke. So far, it’s going well.” She pointed; Deb could make out an obnoxiously bright head standing somewhat aimlessly, the people in his orbit displaying varying degrees of smirking, snickering and outright laughter.

“I’m good for a laugh,” she said proudly. “See that woman in the hideous green scarf?” She pointed. “My impression of her brought down the house last week.” She bent

over, sticking out her bottom and scrunching up her neck. A fat man behind them gave her a low whistle of appreciation, tipping an invisible hat.

“Funny,” Deb said unconvincingly.

“And I won a bet yesterday for touching the most 500s below the elbow!”

Georgie’s expression dropped when she caught sight of Deb’s. “Don’t turn saintly; it’s unattractive.”

“I’m not--”

“You’ll get used to it.” Georgie said blightingly. “You’ll see.”

Then, in a flash, she smiled brightly and took Deb’s elbow. “Have you seen the model yet?”

“The...what?” Deb was trying to play catch up with everything that had just flashed across Georgie’s expressive face.

“The..oh, it’s better if you just see. Come on.” She guided Deb forward strategically upstage. As the incline steepened, she shifted her weight to the balls of her feet. When they had reached the center of the room, Georgie let go; Deb swayed for a moment before rebalancing herself. A tall couple in front of them parted, and Deb saw what was on display.

It was encased in glass, a miniature box with a tiny earth floating beneath it and the planets orbiting above. **Elevator to Space**, the plaque read.

“They’ve been designing it for years. A real passion project for some of the 500’s. Apparently, they’ll be ready to start construction in less than ten years. Of course, the manpower it would take is an obstacle, but they have a few creative solutions.”

Georgie excitedly prattled on while Deb studied the model before her. The plaque said it could fit up to fifty people at a time. Was that counting the extra bulk of space suits? What was there even to do in space? She supposed they'd just build another version of this room, another Almack's with an even higher view.

"Georgie," Deb interrupted, "are you coming to my show?"

"What show?" Georgie was busy smiling sweetly at someone over Deb's shoulder.

"The...show. How I got invited? The opening of Heyer's new theater on the first floor? Deb halted. "I assumed, sorry--it's just everyone else seemed to know who I was."

"You're doing a show?" Georgie turned. "That's great! I'm so glad they decided that."

"Who decided, what?"

"Nevermind," Georgie said quickly, "I'm glad you're working and I will definitely be there next week."

"It's tomorrow."

"Oh, ick." Georgie's attention was wondering. "The Fish is approaching us."

"The fish?"

"Michael Ziegler. You must have seen him. The fingers," she wiggled her own digits comically, rings flashing majestically.

"YES," Deb was dying to know. "What ARE those things?"

"Surgical," Georgie said, dissolving into giggles, "he wanted some part of his body to be long." And then they were both doubled over.

When inquiring heads began to turn in their direction, Georgie quickly straightened up. Deb was apparently too slow.

“Stop it,” Georgie gave her a tiny slap on her forearm. Deb stopped. “He’s still coming. I’ll tell you what to do.” There was a hysterical edge to her tone.

Deb looked furtively ahead at The Fish, and then perplexed back at Georgie, whose entire attitude had undergone a change.

“Follow my lead, it’s a kind of bow, like they taught us at CSB, except you only go far enough for your dress to stretch. Hold it for EXACTLY two seconds, and then come up fast. Got it?”

Deb had just enough time to assent before The Fish was upon them, arching backwards slightly to compensate for the walk downhill he had undertaken. Deb inclined her head and then her upper back, until she could feel the fabric across her shoulder blades expand. She rose up as fast as she could, and then looked up expectantly. The Fish smiled a creeping, unnerving smile.

“You must be Deborah Wrightly.”

His voice did NOT match his body. In fact, it was rather pleasant, lilting even. He unclasped his hands with an effort, and attempted to curl his right fingers around a glass that had been presented to his elbow. His index and middle finger simply stuck out straight, unable to round the bend. “I am very much looking forward to your performance tomorrow night.”

“Thank you, sir.” Sir seemed appropriate.

“My son Harold has told me that it’s a recreation of famous literary death scenes,” The Fish continued.

Deb assumed “Harold” was Harry the sound technician. Did *none* of those children know what the show was even about? More ominously, was Heyer *that*

desperate to make these people happy that he hired every single one of their offspring?

The whole thing felt...incestuous.

“From my understanding, that’s only a part of it.” Georgie filled in the silence with a bald-faced lie, casting Deb a prompting look with a flash of anger.

“Yes,” Deb said quickly. “It’s more of a...”

“Are you doing any hangings?” The Fish interrupted. “I enjoy a good eighteenth century duel.”

“No, not particularly--”

“Any shootings at all? Or deaths by fire?”

“Not really. ”

“Drowning?”

“No.”

“Poison?”

“No?”

“Run over?”

“It’s a lot of stabbing...mostly.” Deb shifted uncomfortably.

“Ah...stabbing.” The Fish had to crane his neck to look up at Deb, but she was powerless beneath his searching glare. “What is it about stabbing?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Seems rather hard work,” he said pensively. “Wouldn’t you rather go quietly?”

Deb looked to Georgie for guidance, but she was studying the inside of her empty glass. What did he mean by quietly? Stabbing was certainly quieter than getting run over.

“Death is noisy,” she said finally. And then quickly added, “at least, that’s how it must feel for a specialist, huh?” She felt immensely silly calling herself a specialist.

“You’re quite right,” The Fish said, without appreciation. “Specialists are all so...special.” His lips twitched downwards in a way that reminded her forcibly of McCreeedy.

Then something snapped like a rubber band, and his whole face widened. “Well, Miss Wrightly, I’ll be seeing you. Probably at these things.” He gestured about broadly. “Even I bend to the will of our lovely Patronesses.” He gifted Georgie with a smile, searched Deb’s face one last time, and departed.

“Penthouse,” Georgie gasped as soon as he was out of earshot.

Deb swallowed. “I think I’d like to leave now.”

“You can’t!” Georgie was horrified. “You haven’t been introduced to the Patronesses!”

Right on cue, Heyer was behind her. “Miss Wrightly. And Miss--”

“Mrs,” she corrected, “Mrs. Ingham.”

“Great.” He was in a hurry. “Miss Wrightly, I’d like to introduce you to the Patronesses of Almack’s, along with a few other people. I need everyone to know you’re here.” The last sentence was said forthrightly.

Deb allowed herself to be led away from Georgie, who waved goodbye with static rigidity, the frozen half-smile that had appeared when Heyer had called her “Miss” still stuck across her face.

The rest was a blur of introductions. If a person stated that they were above 300, Deb remembered not to stick out her hand; in other cases she knew she had put it out too



late. After she bowed to the Patronesses, they spoke two words to her each in cold, languid voices, but Heyer seemed eminently satisfied, so Deb was unruffled. Once they had conquered the middle section of the arena, Heyer turned his gaze up to the higher tables, strategizing. Scaling the top of the room proved a challenge, but Heyer slowed his gait enough for her to trail behind him as he targeted the next person to introduce her to.

Deb met Alice's parents, Doug's father, Trudy's Aunt and both of her Uncles, along with a score of other relations ranging from extremely close, to perplexingly distant, of people working on her show. Those who did not have a son or a fourth cousin somewhere in *The Wrightly Way to Die* assured Heyer that they had received his invitation, and Deb that they would be in attendance. Each new animated avowal was a shot of affirmation; it went straight to Deb's head. By contrast, the alcohol simply swished around inside her stomach irritatingly.

Deb caught sight of Georgie a few more times, at the center of various groups. She shone brightly, commanding her circle's attention. Deb found herself imitating Georgie's relaxed arm movements as she spoke, trying not to let her eyes wander from the face of the person she was speaking to, as Georgie did. When she was successful, the interactions were easier, and her confidence grew. Heyer started to relax at her side, no longer glancing down at her so often to judge her expression or her affect.

At a certain point in the evening, the light changed and the music began in earnest. Everyone gathered around the stage. Then rows were formed in parallel lines, and the dancing began. It bore a strong resemblance to a form of old-fashioned line-dancing she'd had to pick up for a show, but the arm movements were less strict, and the genders were mixed. It was more like the recreation of a long forgotten ritual. Deb stood

off to the side, watching, along with the elderly, the Patronesses, and a few men having a heated discussion in the corner.

When it was Georgie's turn to lead, she did so with gusto. Deb watched her swirl about, and noticed for the first time that her dress wasn't made out of the same baffling material everyone else's was. In fact, it looked more like a repurposed version of her ballgown from the revival of *The Queen's Justice* they'd done together a year ago. Georgie skipped down the center of the two lines, the skirt ballooning out behind her wonderfully. Nearby, Heyer lumbered along like an overgrown child.

The rhythm of the music stayed with Deb, even after it was all over; after the party had ended, after Georgie had kissed her cheek and the Fish had nodded goodbye to her, his squat frame popping out of the throng, after she had found the doorknob on the wall by feel and stepped back onto solid ground. Heyer was waiting for her when she got down to the lobby. He made no comment, for which she was eminently grateful. And then they were back in the darkened car.

Deb arrived home exhilarated. She couldn't help it. Surprisingly, her feet did not ache. She supposed it was the carpeting. There was no need to remove her shoes before taking stock of the fridge, and she traipsed toward it loudly. The awful square cakes were absolutely useless; she was hollow.

"How was the party?" Greg sat in shadow, his hands clasped together formally.

Deb halted and looked down her dress ruefully. "Good?"

"You said it was a costume."

"Oh." Deb ran her tongue across her teeth. "Sorry. I..."

“The big, scary C-level car pulling up made it pretty obvious.” He pushed a bowl in front of him across the table. “Mac n’ cheese.”

Deb sat down, eyeing him. “Thanks.” She didn’t reach for it. Everything was grimmer. She had never noticed how glaring and yet dull the lights in the dining room were. Greg was waiting for something more. “You just...haven’t seemed very interested in what I’ve been doing.” She phrased it carefully.

“What have you been doing?”

Deb didn’t know if he meant tonight, or in the general, existential sense. She opted for something in between. “I have been rehearsing my very own show.” She tried to impress upon him the significance of those words. She spoke again, slower, more deliberately and with a touch of sarcasm. “It opens tomorrow evening. I am ecstatic. I hope you can come.” She looked down meaningfully at Greg’s most dog-eared mystery novel, at the single complimentary invitation she had printed that morning and pressed carefully between its pages. Then she stalked off to her bedroom sans dinner. Her heels started to dig into the backs of her ankles. She took them off and tossed them aimlessly. When she stepped into the shower, throwing an oversized t-shirt over the curtain rod, she could no longer recall the rhythm Georgie had been tripping to.

### *Chapter 7: The Plaza Steps*

*To: All C-Level*

*From: Zieglar, Penthouse*

*Appropriate measures are currently being implemented to ensure none of you will be subjected to such a display again. Additional information will be forthcoming under electronic seal.*

It was in Deb's nature to agonize; but she was possessed of an optimistic streak that generally prevented such brooding, if something positive was tangible enough to grab hold of. So as she sat in her dressing room just a few hours away from the first performance of her very own show, all she felt was excitement. McCreedy had been popping his head in every fifteen minutes or so, to remind her to fall all the way through the empty doorway, or to straighten her arm all the way when holding up the longest dagger, to leave one button undone to make the quick change midway through easier. Deb heard him, and was grateful.

The orchestra, along with the people who actually had jobs to do during the show, had arrived a mere twenty minutes late; ten minutes before Curtain Up. She assumed the superfluous members of the crew would trickle in later. When McCreedy informed her that the orchestra was warming up, Deb brushed the last coating of light foundation across her upper arms. Then, she walked out into the windowless hallway, past the assistant's assistant, the second wardrobe women, the shortest of the three stagehands, the installation women, the guy who moved the doorway onto the stage, and the three other guys who were in charge of moving it off again. They paid no more attention to her as she flitted past them in her white, silk shift, then they had every other day. She paid them less.

Now she stood in the widely spaced wings, behind the fleshy man operating the curtains. The velvet hangings were amazingly soundproof. Everything was silent. Deb

wondered where Heyer would be sitting, probably high up in one of the alcoves. She hoped Georgie was somewhere she wouldn't be able to spot. McCreedy came to stand beside her. His breath gave her bare shoulder goosebumps.

"Two minutes," he said. The curtain guy looked up from his phone and gave him an unconcerned little nod. "Ready?" McCreedy posed this question to Deb, handing her the first dagger of the show, a bejeweled, tinted-gold statement piece. The other daggers, in an array of colors and lengths, were already placed ominously around the stage.

"Yes." She meant it.

"Hang on." He had her turn towards him; before she could react, he had taken a corner of his sleeve and wiped it clear across her carefully made-up eyes, destroying the picture she had so painstakingly created.

"Whaa--"

"Much better." He said triumphantly.

Deb clenched as a false eyelash dropped down onto her cheek. She opened her mouth, incensed, but then snapped it shut in realization. Once again, McCreedy had made her tainted and angry, no locked box needed. Her performance would be better because of it. There was a swishing sound and the curtains began to part. She turned back to face them, away from McCreedy who was busy dusting off his sleeve as best he could. The orchestra's somber tune came through now, funereal and clear.

She took a deep breath in, clutching the dagger more securely in her fist. The music amplified in volume; she was almost able to see out into the audience. McCreedy was craning his neck, preparing to judge how many of the furthest back rows were filled. If they were, Deb would have to be bigger, to project wider.

Then the curtains were all the way open. It was time. Deb breathed out, threw out her chest, and stepped forward expecting to see a full house. Instead, she saw emptiness.

The orchestra was playing for no one. Not a single seat was filled. There was no audience. Deb stopped short, her ankle rolling with the shock. Behind her, McCreedy cursed. The orchestra kept playing; they were on the last bar. Deb was supposed to be out on the stage.

“You need to walk,” McCreedy whispered savagely.

Deb whipped around. “There is *no one* there.” She mirrored his tone.

“It doesn’t matter.” He gave her a shove. “You go out there and you do this.”

“NO.” Deb shoved him right back.

“*Listen.*” He grabbed both her wrists and squeezed. “You don’t perform, we don’t get paid.”

“Then we don’t get paid.” Deb squirmed in his grip to no avail.

“We get SUED.” McCreedy wasn’t whispering anymore.

Deb went rigid. McCreedy released her hands.

“They said they would come, the invitations--” Deb’s voice was small, hollow.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“That clause in our contracts never made sense until now.” McCreedy said grimly. He took Deb by the shoulders, gently this time. “Just get through it. Okay? Get through it.”

His pleading, tired face seemed far away. Deb turned from it in resignation, and stumbled blindly out onto the stage.

An hour and a half later, Deb crumpled for the last time. Her breath slowed to an imperceptible crawl, completing the illusion of decease. As rehearsed, the orchestra began a languorous melody: the button on the epilogue. It trailed off into the distance. She waited for the dismal silence that was assuredly to follow. But before it could settle in, a clap rang out, and then another one.

Was it McCreedy? Deb sat up. The spotlight still shone. She put a hand over her eyes as a visor, to see where the sound was coming from. She looked out into dozens of vacant rows as far as she was able; she saw Greg.

He was sitting in the center of the very last row, leading a small but enthusiastic round of applause. Filling up the rest of the row was what looked to be the cleaning crew: a smattering of women and young-ish men in dull pink jumpsuits, with large containers filled with bottles and wrinkled washcloths at their feet. Lottie was bouncing up and down in her seat. Deb smiled in spite of herself. She stood up gracefully and gave her best bow. Before it was even completed, the orchestra had started to disperse. She looked back into the wings, where McCreedy was sitting glassy-eyed on a stool; the curtain guy and all the prop people had already gone. She saw them now as agents of evil.

The rest of these agents scurried quickly away. Deb remained standing where she was, signaling for Greg to keep quiet until everyone was gone. He obeyed, Lottie and the others following his lead, until the last unhelpful person had exited. As soon as that occurred, Deb jumped down off the stage as if it had burned her. She sank down into a luscious, red, velvet front row seat.

“Deb?” Greg and the cleaning crew had made their way down the aisle and were filing into the row. He sat down gingerly beside her.

She was still clad in the heavy robe saved for her final *Crumple*; it was dark green to compliment her skin, clasped at the throat with a single pearl. Its elegance was enhanced next to Greg's bulky winter coat. The chair reclined as she leaned back. "This chair reclines," she said, a little hoarsely.

Deb?" Greg repeated, more worried.

"Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn mother fuck--trapping me in this shit show--goddamn--" McCreedy was mumbling as he walked out onto the stage.

"Who are you?" Greg asked, interrupting him.

"Joseph McCreedy. Director. Nice to meet you." McCreedy snapped.

"Goddamit," he added for emphasis.

Greg put his hand up in a shooining motion. "Go. Get outta here."

"Excuse me?" McCreedy leered down at him, eyebrows raised.

"You locked her in a box and made me her errand boy--"

"It was an ACCIDENT."

"Hey!" Lottie spoke, "can we cool it?" She waved one hand in front of Deb's face. "Miss Wrightly?"

Deb started and then her eyes refocused on Lottie's face. "Thanks for watching," she said.

"Sure." A huge smile broke out across her face. "When we didn't see anyone arrive we pretty much made a dash for it." The smile faded. "Sorry about that... I guess they never sent out those invites, huh."

"You knew it was invitation only?" McCreedy asked.



“I clean the lobby security desk,” Lottie said simply. “Sometimes it takes a while for an image to close out, especially outgoing mail. I saw Miss Wrightly’s name and the name of the show in those big looping letters before it vanished.”

“Have you seen anything else on that computer?” Greg leaned towards her.

“What would she know?” McCreedy started to pace back and forth. “The question is why would they hire us to do a show they don’t want anybody to pay for!”

Deb watched him for a moment, eyebrows furrowed. “Heyer said he wanted everyone at Almack’s to see that I was there, like I was evidence or something,” she said slowly.

“You were invited to Almack’s?” McCreedy was incredulous.

“Lottie,” Greg disregarded him. His tone shifted. “Lottie?”

Lottie was resolutely staring at her knees, not blinking. Her face, which Deb had only ever seen lit up in some variation of awe, had become a mask.

“Greg, don’t...” Deb said tiredly. The shock had passed. Her body, enervated, drooped.

“We should go,” another cleaning woman said quickly. “If the lobby sensors don’t get a heat signature by 11:00, we’ll be fired. LT?” She got up and took Lottie by the elbow. Lottie stood up.

“Do you know the password? To the computer?” Greg stood up too. There was an awake quality to his expression that Deb rarely saw. It opened up his whole face.

“No, we don’t,” the oldest cleaner, a middle-aged man, said hastily.

“I think you do.” Greg was still looking at Lottie. “You’re using--” he glanced down. “Hytail-Cleanser. I know that stuff. It’s cheap; that’s why all the buildings use it.

They don't care if you have to scrub extra hard to make things look good. It's particularly bad at removing fatty acids...like the ones in fingerprints.” He spoke definitively. “You gave that keyboard an extra good scrubbing, and then as soon as the first guard typed in the password, you went over and "tidied up" when he took a bathroom break, didn't you? What'd you use to show them, face powder?” He stared her down.

The middle-aged cleaner stepped in front of Lottie. "This is crazy. Who knows that much about cleansers?"

Deb stood beside Greg. "I can vouch for my roommate knowing his cleaning supplies."

Lottie peeked out from behind the middle-aged cleaner's back. "Eyeshadow. My favorite."

"How'd you figure out the sequence? You'd get locked out with too many tries." Greg tried to puzzle it out.

Lottie glanced over at her fellow cleaners and then back. When she spoke, she spoke to Deb. "Nobody pays attention to people like me. They say stuff when I'm in the room. They leave things lying around.” She shrugged. “I pay attention to them. Especially when they're not paying attention to me." She leaned in towards Greg. “That one wasn't even that hard. The next one was tougher."

"The *next* one?" Deb gripped Greg's arm with blood-constricting force.

“We need to leave. Now.” The three women formed a circle around Lottie and began herding her out of room. But she broke free.

“I'm sorry.” she bolted back down the aisle. “She should know.”

There was a chorus of “*LT*” and “*Lottie, don’t!*” from the others. Deb and Greg parted as Lottie came to stand between them. McCreedy was still pacing onstage, glancing down irregularly at the action beneath him. Lottie was quite short; both Deb and Greg towered over her.

She swallowed. “It happened a few months ago.”

“Don’t.” The woman who had suggested leaving reached out to Lottie commandingly, shaking her head back and forth violently.

Lottie ignored her. “We got to the Plaza around 5:00 a.m. I--think it was a Thursday. I was a little dizzy from pounding a RagePlexus. The bus pulls up, and there’s a man standing in front of the steps with a bunch of other scary guys behind him, waiting for us. He was so short and *so* ugly, and he was wearing gloves, even though it was still summer. There were a lot of lawyer cars in the parking lot. I was terrified. The ugly man said that there had been an accident, and that we were to spend the whole day cleaning up the steps.” Her eyes darted back and forth. She was seeing a memory worth forgetting. “They all went inside and we started to clean...blood. Dried blood--buckets of it. Sticky pools so deep, they hadn’t dried yet. Like someone had sprayed it all over.”

Lottie let that sink in; she began to trek back up the aisle, motioning for everyone to follow. They did, in a strange procession: the rest of the cleaning crew tailing her closely, speaking her name entreatingly; Deb and Greg marching side by side, grimly; McCreedy begrudgingly following in their wake, still mumbling. Lottie led them out of the theater, down the hallway, and into the darkened, vacant lobby. As they entered, Greg was glad the heat signatures would recognize them. He was all for getting to the truth, but God forbid he actually get someone fired.

Lottie sat down behind the long desk and touched the computer screen; it lit up immediately.

“The kid’s actually right about that stuff?” McCreedy reached into the basket closest to him and picked up one of the bottles of Hytail. One of the women who looked to be around Lottie’s age snatched the bottle back from him.

“It’s here,” Lottie said. Deb and Greg bent over her shoulder. Sure enough, she had pulled up an unlabeled black folder. It sat next to a slightly less black folder labeled *Uninvitations*. “Huh,” she peered at the slightly less black folder, “I didn’t see the label before.”

Greg made a popping sound with his mouth. “Well, that explains that.”

“You could get us all fired, or *sued*.” The woman holding the Hytail Cleanser hissed.

Lottie looked up at Deb. “Are you sure you want to see?”

Deb flicked away Lottie’s calloused hand and clicked on the unlabeled folder. A pop-up asked for another password.

“One second,” Lottie said. She thought for a moment, then typed in something long with a lot of capitalizations. Greg looked impressed. “Okay, here.”

Deb clicked again. An image came up.

In the background was the familiar front entrance of the Plaza. Across the top of the glass doors were spray-painted the words “LET US LIVE” in vivid crimson. In the foreground was a tangled mess of corpses. They were splayed out across the steps, ten per row. Their knees were torqued to the left, their heads were turned to the right, one

hand of each still held a small dagger. Deb saw one hundred versions of *The Wrightly Crumple* come to life, in actual death.

There was a long silence. Greg broke it by walking to the wastebasket in the corner of the room and throwing up. The cleaning crew had turned away from the computer screen, and now had a second image to avert their eyes from. Deb had buckled over at the waist like a despairing hinge, her body propped up by Lottie's in the chair beneath her. Lottie looked up and scanned Deb's face; her own was stricken.

McCreedy began to laugh. It built and built and built. "We're trapped." He patted Deb on the shoulder. "Deborah--we're trapped together now, in this..." he waved his arms, "*metaphorical* box." He laughed harder and louder.

Greg stopped vomiting. He wiped his mouth and breathed. Then he looked back. McCreedy was in stitches, while most of the crew was huddled together, speaking in annoyed, anxious tones. Deb still studied the image unblinkingly, Lottie trapped beneath her half-bent body. Deb's right hand still rested on the silver mouse; her left one grasped the edge of the table.

As soon as his stomach settled, Greg walked around to the other side of the desk, facing Deb. Instead of futilely attempting to get her attention, he silently signaled Lottie to press the power button via frantic motions. Once she got the gist of what he was saying, the screen slowly faded to black. The bodies vanished.

Instinctively, Deb raised her body just enough for Lottie to squeeze out of the chair, whereupon she was enveloped by her crew, casting a look of pity back towards Deb before they completely swallowed her. Greg supposed they were meant to have

moved on from the lobby by now, and, after noting the time, the cleaners disappeared down the hallway toward the office suite two doors from the theater.

Then it was just the three of them. Greg tried to judge what the best thing was to do. The last time Deb had been confronted by suicide, stalling didn't do much good. He had to be direct.

"You didn't kill them," he said to her loudly, then immediately took a half-step backwards as her gaze turned on him.

McCreedy was disgusted. "Jesus." He walked over to one of the comfiest-looking armchairs and plopped down. Greg followed his lead, dropping himself in the slightly more sterile-looking couch opposite the director.

Perhaps because they had both just moved, Deb was able to fully straighten up. She walked over to the couch Greg had just collapsed onto, and sat down beside him, finally unclasping the cape she still wore. It billowed down around her, Greg registering its soft material as it brushed his arm. He waited for her to speak.

"I shouldn't have taken the money." Deb finally said, as if she was releasing something. "I should've stopped after I found out that people were....that I was making people--" she sat up straighter, avoiding Greg's eye, "kill themselves."

"You were also making people happy." Greg said matter-of-factly.

He reached his hand across the table and found hers. Her head sank down onto his shoulder.

The elevator *pinged!* and 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. people flooded the lobby noisily, tired after a long day. Deb, Greg, and McCreedy sat motionless, watching the

throng file past the glass doors and out onto the steps, then turning around the corner to where big, orange buses were surely waiting. Greg had a thought.

“Deb.” He poked her. “The contract doesn’t say anything about staying inside the actual theater, does it?”

“No?” She said questioningly without raising her head. “Just the building.”

“ACTRESS and DIRECTOR will deliver one performance of production per night, every night, exclusively at the Sunset Plaza, until such time as PRODUCER cancels the contract.” McCreedy recited gloomily.

“Got it!” Greg darted forward on the couch, Deb’s head fell sideways into the air. “You can just go right upstairs and perform for the other people in the building.” He paused dramatically to showcase the idea. McCreedy and Deb just stared. Greg rolled forward onto the balls of his feet eagerly, spelling out his plan. “You don’t leave the Plaza. You still get an audience. You make people happy. Everybody wins.” He thought for a second. “Except the Almack’s assholes who don’t want anyone to see you perform. They lose.”

McCreedy snorted. “Like guerilla theater? That went out of fashion years ago.”

“Yes!” Greg said blankly, but excitedly. “Whatever that means--listen,” he turned back to Deb. “All they do is sit up there and do the same boring things until their eyes cross and their legs fall asleep. They’ll be a great audience!” He stopped short.

“Guerrilla theater...” Deb said thoughtfully.

“Alright,” McCreedy wiped a hand across his brow, “let’s loophole the shit out of this and get our payday.”

“You’re an elegant man,” Greg said, not without humor.

“Occasionally,” McCreedy replied. He surveyed Greg dispassionately. “I’m guessing you’re a *clean* man.”

Deb turned first towards Greg, upright and jubilant, then towards McCreedy, sour-faced but resigned. Then her attention was drawn backwards to where a lone female straggler had just entered the lobby from the elevators. The heel of her shoe was broken; she limped slowly past the desk. Behind her, Deb could just make out the stainless steel elevator doors; they were closing. She lifted her chin skywards and imagined herself levitating off the couch, rising higher and higher until she flew through the smooth, beige ceiling, and then through the next ceiling, and then the next one, until there were no more ceilings left, because she had reached the highest possible point in the universe, where she was safe.

**END OF PART ONE**