

Spring 2022

The Business Of Remembering

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Recommended Citation

Bitton, Miles, "The Business Of Remembering" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 104.

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The Business Of Remembering

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

Miles Bitton

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Thanks,

To David Ritz and Brandon Parraway, masters in your respective crafts, for your invaluable insight.

To my family, friends, and loved ones, for providing me with the support, experience, and ability to shape this slightly imaginary world.

To my advisors, Marina Van Zuylen and Lucy Sante, for your perspective, feedback, and encouragement throughout my entire college experience.

The Business Of Remembering

By Miles Bitton

They met in person for the first time on the third floor of 76 Bloomfield Street in Hoboken, New Jersey. It had been nearly three months of emails and FaceTime calls, coordinating and convincing, until an agreement could be made that satisfied both parties. Samir's agent had advised against the project altogether. *He's too volatile. You shouldn't be in business with someone with a history like his.* It was a bit confusing, considering Samir's usual subjects were often far more dangerous. So he persisted, although he agreed to give up if the pitching process went awry. They held one rushed phone interview prior to this meeting—Samir was in Belize at the time, finishing a job of a very different nature. The call was just long enough for him to get a sense of his new potential subject. Subject was his chosen word, although in reality it was something more like a boss or a victim. He cranked out a proposal in a week and sent it to his publisher. His agent relayed to him that the initial response was something along the lines of, *It's good, but it isn't really what he does,* at which point Samir took the liberty of calling them himself to insist-slash-threaten that they give him a chance, or he would take the project elsewhere. And so, the following Monday, Samir called his new subject with the good news and worked out a time for them to meet in person.

The hallway on the third floor of 76 Bloomfield Street in Hoboken, New Jersey was short and wide. The ceiling nearly brushed the hair on the top of Samir's six-foot-four-inch figure. The walls were an eggshell white, although perhaps they just seemed that way because of the dim yellow lights which lined the ceiling. The floor was a green and brown carpet with spots of all other colors. It wasn't clear whether or not they were meant to be there. The apartment number was 3F. Samir knocked on the cold metal door. After a moment, he saw the light in the peephole disappear. He heard a deep, already familiar voice.

“Who is it?”

Samir checked his watch. He was right on time.

“It’s Samir,” he said. “Can’t you see me?” He heard three clicks behind the door before the knob turned and it swung open.

“Sorry,” said Alan. “It’s dark out here. And you look like some other people I know.”

“Other people you wouldn’t have let in?”

Alan turned to Samir. He pursed his lips and put a hand up.

“Can we not start that yet?”

Samir nodded. Alan gestured to the couch.

“Want somethin’? Water? Whiskey?”

“Bit early for whiskey,” said Samir. He sat, placing his bag down on the ground beside his feet. Alan shrugged.

“It’s Saturday,” he said.

Alan was relatively tall—although in that room, at the time, he was relatively short. He had slick black hair and a clean-shaven face. His eyes were sunken and the skin around them was noticeably darker than the rest of his pale complexion. From Samir’s perspective, Alan was in perfect shape. His collared shirt hugged thick biceps and a tight waist.

“Water’s fine, thanks,” said Samir.

The living room was a few steps below the rest of the apartment. The shelves were overstuffed with framed pictures, certificates, trophies, medals, memorabilia, CDs, and a few stuffed animals. Across from the couch, there was a small TV on a wooden folding table with a Playstation 3 wedged between its legs. A thick hand with a glass of water snapped Samir out of his wandering observation. He took the glass—it felt greasy in his hands—and sipped in an effort

to show his gratitude. Alan sat in a cushioned chair beside the couch, whiskey in hand, and kicked his feet up onto the glass coffee table. The room rattled.

Beside Alan's feet on the table were Samir's recorder, notebook and pen. Alan stared the younger man up and down. He was slim with similarly slick, messy black hair, and a heavy tan. His face was smooth and round with just a bit of stubble. In that moment Alan considered, briefly, as he had so many times before, telling the kid to fuck off. But, his intrigue got the best of him. He had asked for Samir's help after all. He figured he should trust his own instincts. Samir spoke.

"So, Alan, let me ask you, what—"

"Really jumping right into it, huh? Not even trying to get me wet first." Alan chuckled. Samir darted his eyes around the room. "Not your type of humor. Got it."

"No, no, I want you to talk however you would normally. Don't— don't censor yourself for me," said Samir.

"It would help if you laugh at my jokes, then." He paused. "So, how do we get started with this whole thing?"

"Well," Samir perked up. "First off, Alan, it's nice to finally meet you in person."

"You too, Samir Stevens. Is that really your name? Like, the one you were born with?"

"No," said Samir. "Oglesby."

Alan choked on his drink.

"Oglewhat?"

"Oglesby. It's British. From my dad's side."

Alan snorted.

"Your name is Oglesby?"

“Samir Oglesby, yes.”

“Well, Samir Oglesby... So, Samir, that part’s French?”

“Egyptian, actually, my mom is from Cairo, but, but yeah it’s a very common name in France, too. You been to France before?”

Alan sunk into his chair and waved his free hand around as he spoke.

“Oh, plenty of times. I used to have a place there. French motherfuckers are wild. I had a party one time, someone stole a painting right off the wall, nobody noticed. Or, if they did, nobody said anything. And it wasn’t a little thing either.” He spread his arms out as wide as he could. “It was, like, this big.”

“Used to have a place?”

“Well, yeah, you know, after—” Alan stopped and smiled at Samir. He jabbed a meaty index finger in his direction. “Ah, you’re good. You turned that around fast. You don’t want to talk about yourself? You already know so much about me.”

“We can keep talking about me,” Samir said, reaching for his recorder and notebook. “But, do you mind if I start recording?”

“That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it?”

Samir gave him a timid sneer. He clicked on the recorder. Alan noticed he was missing a right pinky finger.

“What would you like to ask me?” said Samir.

Alan dropped his feet onto the ground and leaned forward. He sat silent, gripping his chin. He smiled and let a heavy burst of air out through his nostrils.

“Why me?” he said. “Surely I’m not the only one to have asked you for this. And I know you’ve met more interesting people than me. So, why’d you agree to tell my story?” Samir kept

quiet. He saw more words sitting on Alan's lips. They came after a brief pause. "I read your last few articles. Everything you write about... it's exciting, it's dangerous, it's thrilling, it's scary, it's... I don't know, it's not me. Not now."

"You're not dangerous?"

"Well, I am dangerous," he said, raising his fist. The knuckles were red. "But—"

"Your life hasn't been exciting?"

"Well, it, it, it used to be—"

"I'm not writing about you, Alan. I'm writing as you. I'm living your life, learning your language, thinking your thoughts. And that's scary."

Alan stared at his new ghost. He sensed no threat, and he was good at those things. Not once, since they had met some four months ago, did Alan detect even the slightest hint of falsehood in Samir's intentions. It concerned him, because it was his job to identify such things. And the fact that he couldn't made him more inclined to believe he had gotten rusty than to believe the man before him was truly so pure. What he could see quite plainly was that the scrawny, timid boy across from him was, despite his past, intimidated, nervous, out of his element. What confused Alan most, however, was that he felt intimidated, too.

"I scare you," he said.

Samir nodded. "The idea of you, more like. Being you."

"I didn't think this would get so serious. I mean, it's just a book."

"We're dealing with your reputation here. This is how you present yourself, officially, forever."

"My reputation is already ruined," said Alan.

“We’ll get to that,” said Samir. “And we’ll fix that. I know you want to tell your side of the story. The whole truth.”

“Yeah, I don’t even know that I do.”

Alan took a big sip. Samir inhaled.

“Well, like I said, we’ll get to that. For now, just start from the beginning.”

Alan spoke for several hours about his upbringing, standing up periodically to refill his glass. Born in Wisconsin, he traveled the world with his military-adjacent father from an age too young to remember, napping through contract negotiations in Osaka and Berlin and Kuwait City and Buenos Aires. He wouldn’t meet his mother until he was in his twenties. When Alan was ten, his father knocked up a woman in Hawaii and they welcomed another boy on the morning of his eleventh birthday. Needless to say, the day was ruined. Alan and his father continued to travel for six more years, staying only weeks at a time—months if he was lucky—in any given city. They would retreat periodically to Hawaii for a few days of the normal family life he had so longed for since he had seen it on TV as a younger boy. His brother, Kimo, would double in size each time they saw him. Mia, Kimo’s mother, was madly in love with Alan’s old man, bursting with joy every time he came around. Alan remained distant from her, not out of resentment, but because he had seen the way his father lived, and feared the guilt of what he had seen would be overwhelming if he let himself care for this woman.

“I was seventeen and we were in Germany. Berlin. It was always my least favorite,” said Alan. “Dad had just gotten back to the house after a meeting. His friend was one of the biggest event promoters in Germany. We were staying at his house in Berlin, which he never lived in.”

“What was his name?”

“Nels something. Finkel, I think. Something kind of Jewy like that. I knew him well, but I mostly just knew him as Nels. Man, I haven’t thought about him in a long time. So it was a Saturday, that I remember very clearly. I had a girl over, Sophie Butreaux. Who became my ex-wife. Friend of a family friend. We would have our little flings every time I came to her country. The phone had been ringing for a couple hours, but Dad told me never to answer the phone when we were traveling, because it would never be for me.

“So, he got home, we were on the couch watching some show without subtitles. It was a green couch. Green is my favorite color. He said ‘hi’ to me and Sophie. I told him the phone had been ringing every few minutes. He said thanks and went into the kitchen to make some coffee. The phone started ringing again and I heard his deep voice from the kitchen, like, ‘hello?’ It was quiet for a while. I couldn’t make out anything he said, but I heard when he hung up. He walked back into the living room, pale as a fucking ghost. And Dad wasn’t a pale guy. I could see in his eyes that I wouldn’t like what he was about to say. And I didn’t. ‘We gotta go,’ he said. Just like that, ‘we gotta go,’ real somber-like. I didn’t get it. He told Sophie to leave. She was so concerned, but I assured her it was nothing. I’d call her when I got to wherever we were going next. We kissed, and Dad shouted that there was no time for that. I ran upstairs and packed my shit in maybe ten minutes, and then we were in a car to the airport. I kept asking what was going on, but Dad was on the car phone, trying to get us a jet back to the states within the hour. I was being a little bitch about it, nagging and tugging and whining. I was scared and I was angry and, honestly, I was sad. Dad was sweating like crazy. Nobody had a plane available on such short notice, so we had to fly commercial. I’d only flown commercial once or twice before. It felt like we were running from something. Every time I asked what was happening, he told me it was nothing. We just needed to go see Mia and Kimo. When I asked if they were okay, he told me

they were fine and I needed to stop asking questions. The whole flight home he was shaking his leg, wiping his forehead, darting his eyes around, drinking, drinking, drinking. We had a layover in New York and then another in California. They were short. We were running, running, running, it was chaos. On the planes, I would pass out for hours at a time and every time I woke up Dad would just be sitting there, staring at nothing, sweating, biting his lip, it was terrifying. Dad had arranged for a jet to be ready in California, so the last leg of our trip was a bit more luxurious, but the second we boarded, he locked himself in the bathroom and didn't come out for a while. I can't stress this enough, and it's very important to the story. He would completely shut me down every single time I tried to get anything out of him. It was infuriating, but I knew if I expressed my frustration, it would only make things worse. All in all, it was about twenty three hours to get back to Kauai. Far as I knew, he didn't rest for a moment of the trip. As we stepped off the plane, Dad took a deep inhale. Deep, deep. And as he let it out, it seemed like all of the concern left with it. He put on a smile, straightened his tie, and greeted Mia and Kimo on the tarmac, cool as ever. I couldn't shake it so easily and Mia noticed. She asked if I was okay, but Dad assured her I was fine before I could say anything. It was weird, man. The whole ride home, I was in the back with Kimo, he was playing with my hair. It was beautiful then. Summer in Hawaii, what could be more perfect? We get home and all of a sudden Dad is just this big ol' ball of sunshine. We went to the beach and he sent the housekeeper out for groceries. He said he was gonna cook us a feast. Threw his arms out real big. Kimo was having a blast and Mia was so happy to have her man home. To me, I don't know, it felt like he was putting on a play or something. Maniacal."

Alan paused. He walked over to the minibar and poured himself another glass. It was the fifth. Samir checked his watch. It was nearly five o'clock.

“So, what happened?” he said.

Alan turned back to him and slouched his shoulders. He sighed and walked over to the window, looking out at the Manhattan skyline.

“We had two days of fun. They didn’t suspect a thing. And, naively, I started to think maybe Dad just really, really wanted to come home to the family. He did make a feast, even though he couldn’t cook very well. Sometimes money makes up for that. We had steak and lobster and sea urchin and whatnot. And then, Tuesday morning, bright and early, four SUVs pull up out front. Men in black suits and sunglasses. Action movie type shit. Dad came to my room and told me he was sorry and that someday he’d explain everything and then he left with them. What we found out later, and I never really fully understood it, was that basically Dad had been using government resources—the planes, the hotels, the credit cards—to host his own private meetings with investors, prostitutes, drug dealers, arms dealers, a fucking apartment for some lady in Argentina, those kinds of things. He’d been, like, laundering money through the government, too. I couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. Well, I believed the part about the lady in Argentina. But the rest? It was big time bad shit. And after that, they took everything. The houses, the cars, my fucking record player. Froze all his assets. Then Mia was stuck with me. And we were stuck in the basement of her mother’s house on the other side of the island. The side where people don’t vacation.”

Alan paused. He sat back down and leaned forward, forearms resting on his thighs, hands interlaced.

“Do you have any resources, newspapers, whatever, about the incident with your father?” said Samir.

“Something, somewhere, probably. I’ll try to find it for you.”

“Thanks.”

Alan stared at Samir.

“That’s all you have to say?” he said.

Samir began to squirm.

“I mean, I sympathize, of course, but I’m not trying to become too involved in your story. It’s sort of my job here to be objective.”

“So, I just tell you the most traumatic, transformative moments of my life, and all you can say in response is, ‘prove it.’ That’s how this is gonna work?”

“No, Alan, I’m sorry, I just—”

“I think we’re done for today. I gotta eat something.”

Samir was trembling and he was trying to hide it.

“I’m really sorry Alan, I didn’t mean to downplay what you were telling me.”

“Samir. I said we’re done. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’ll be in touch soon.”

Samir nodded. He ended the recording and packed his things back into his bag. Alan stood up and walked over to the front door. Samir started towards him.

“Have a good weekend, kid,” said Alan.

“Yeah, you too Alan. Thank you for today, I got a whole lot.”

“Alright, now, take care.”

Samir could smell the alcohol on Alan’s breath. He stopped halfway out the door.

“Um, I’ll see you Monday?” he said.

“Can’t Monday, I have work.”

“Yeah, I know, didn’t my agent talk to you? He said you said I could shadow you at work.”

Alan stared.

“Oh, yeah sure, fine.” He paused. “And listen, I’m giving you my whole life now. I’m telling you things I’ve never told anyone else. So, don’t ever talk to me through your fucking agent again. You have my number. Use it.”

Samir nodded. He stepped out. The door slammed behind him, just as his foot left the frame. He jumped. On the elevator down, Samir was in near tears. He was mumbling profanities to himself and gripping the rail. His hands were turning red. His phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a text from Joanna.

See you in an hour <3

He had completely forgotten. Maybe it was a good thing Alan kicked him out.

Upstairs, Alan was on the couch. He had grabbed a bowl of grapes from the fridge. He removed his shirt and turned on the TV. Basketball. No sound. The orange sunset glared through the window. It was too much for his drunken eyes. He grabbed a pillow from behind him and pressed it into his face. He would remain there until morning.

* * *

Samir was in the business of remembering. Many of his assignments would require he not make any real-time documentation of his locations or conversations. As such, he was frequently requested specifically for his ability to transcribe and describe from memory. Attempts were often made to discredit him for the same reason. He took relief in the prospect of being able to rest his mind a bit for this next project. Rest may have been an overstatement. There were plenty of other stressors still on his plate.

That evening, the prime stressor was Joanna, his fiancée. They had met four years prior at a fundraising event for a newspaper for which Samir was writing frequently at the time. She was three years his senior. Samir made a decent living on his own, but she was undoubtedly the breadwinner of the two. She was already at the restaurant when Samir arrived, of course. He couldn't recall a time he had ever been earlier than her for anything. She picked the restaurant too, and insisted on paying. Samir would try his hardest not to let her, but she usually got what she wanted. The restaurant's name was some French word seemingly pulled out of a hat. It was back in New York City, known for serving anything expensive. It wasn't Samir's taste.

Joanna looked beautiful, as she always did. She wore a new blue dress that he thought he might have bought her. Her straight brown hair was cut into a short bob. Her nails were blue to match the dress. Samir caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on the way to the table and felt utterly unprepared. He had on a loose fitting white linen shirt and black cargo pants. He hadn't shaved in three days and his hair was scruffed and disheveled. He tried to slick it back with his hand. Despite his complete failure to match his date, she seemed genuinely happy to see him as he approached the table. She stood to welcome him.

"Hey baby," she said.

"Hey," said Samir. "You look amazing, sorry I'm late."

She looked down at her watch.

"Thanks. You're not late."

"Well, you know, by your standards." He smiled. "You look, like, really amazing, Jo."

She blushed. They sat down.

"Thanks, Sammy, I had a meeting right before this for a big Upper East Side thing, so I— you know how it goes."

“Well, I’m glad I get to benefit from it, too.”

“You look good, too, Sammy.” She leaned in and whispered, “You look like a celebrity. I like this little beard you got coming in.”

Samir rubbed his cheek.

“It wasn’t intentional,” he said.

“Well, I like it, and therefore I think you should keep it.”

“Therefore?”

“Therefore.”

”Well, therefore, I guess I’ll keep it.”

Samir rubbed his cheek again.

“So, how was your meeting?” he said.

“Ah, it was great! The client is some old broker named—“

The waiter approached and caught her attention. Before he could speak, she told him that she would like a vodka tonic and Samir would like the blackberry mint margarita and they would both like waters and the spicy tuna on crispy fried rice to start. He nodded and left.

“So anyway,” she continued. “Really funny old guy, Russian, named, like, Anatoly... Shastaparovich, something wild like that. Get this, he said his uncle was a chess grandmaster who was executed by the Nazis. Do you know who that could have been?”

Samir was staring into his drink.

“Sammy?” she said. He looked up.

“Oh, yeah, maybe. Sometimes I wonder if they’re just making it all up.”

Joanna didn't like the way he would speak sometimes. She wanted him to understand exactly what she meant when she said things, and she wished she could understand what he meant, too.

"Right, well, anyway," she continued. "His children were really sweet and I totally got what they wanted to— wait, Sammy, how did *your* meeting go? With the guy?"

Samir folded and unfolded the napkin in his lap. His neck burned. He sighed.

"Alan. I don't know, Jo."

She frowned.

"What do you mean? You were so excited about this."

"Yeah, he's just more... intense than I anticipated. I kinda pissed him off."

Joanna glared at him, unamused.

"Intense? You literally just spent a month with a fucking Belizian crime syndicate, Sammy. Wasn't this supposed to be easier?"

Samir looked up through tired eyes.

"It's too early to know," he said. "He's just... there's a lot there. I can feel it radiating off of him. And I have no fucking idea how I'm gonna write this book. I don't know how to write an autobiography."

"Didn't you reach out to that Martin guy for help?"

"Yeah, but he pretty much just told me everybody goes about it differently. Anyway, I'd rather not talk about it right now. Can we have a no-work dinner? How's your mom? You saw her earlier, right?"

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to start anything. I'm just really excited for you," said Joanna

The waiter reappeared with a basket of bread.

“Oh,” said Joanna.

“She doesn’t eat that,” said Samir.

The waiter apologized and began to turn.

“No,” said Joanna, maintaining eye contact with Samir. “I want some bread.”

Samir rapped his fingers on the table, sunken deep in his chair, staring back. He gave her a little smirk. The waiter hesitantly placed the bread on the table and turned away.

“What was that?” he said. “You don’t eat bread.”

“Well, I want some right now.”

She took a little plate in her slender fingers and dumped some olive oil from the cruet. She topped it with too much salt.

“I think he needs to tell me his story,” said Samir, already over it. “Maybe that’s why he reached out. Like, for therapeutic reasons.”

“So you do want to talk about it?” she said.

Rather than respond, Samir told her he was going to the bathroom. In the bathroom he gave himself a slight acknowledgement in the mirror. He was raggedy head to toe but in a way that most, Joanna included, apparently, considered fashionable. He wished he could put more effort into his appearance, but he could never find the patience or inspiration to do so. He was overwhelmed by his reflection and by the restaurant and by the day. Joanna, too, sparked an intense anxiety which he could never quite place. Some sense of over-loving and fear of causing her the slightest inconvenience. He splashed some water on his face.

The appetizer had arrived when he got back to the table and Joanna had eaten most of the bread. He sat. She glanced at him and then at the food.

“Thank God,” she said. “You alright?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

“Your face is wet.”

Samir touched his face and shrugged.

Joanna grabbed his hand.

“Hey, look at me,” she said.

He did.

“You got this.”

She smiled. He half-smiled back. They didn't address anything too serious for the rest of the dinner. He made sure to tell Joanna how beautiful she was a few more times.

* * *

Samir arrived at the bank on Madison Avenue at 8:27 AM the following Monday, dressed in all black, as he had been ordered. He leaned against the limestone wall with a cup of iced tea in one hand and a book in the other. He had flipped his watch so that he could keep track of the time as he read. It was 8:31 when he heard the familiar, growling voice.

“What are you reading?”

Alan looked like a child playing dress-up in his uniform. Black slacks, a belt with a radio, gun, and baton, a gray button-down tucked in, with a black tie, and a black hat with a badge on the front.

“Don't look at me like that,” he said. Samir didn't even notice that he was looking a certain way. He fixed his face. “It's not ideal, but it's part of the job.”

“No, no, you look good,” said Samir, shoving his book back into the satchel slung over his shoulder.

“I didn’t ask if I look good,” said Alan. “I asked what you were reading.”

“Oh, it’s a friend’s new book. A novel, actually, he wanted my thoughts about—”

“Do you always give rambling answers? I just wanted a name, Samir.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s called *Lightweight*. And the author, my friend, his name is Pedro Saloman.”

“One thing I’ve learned,” said Alan. He removed a key from his pocket and stuck it into the hole in the gate. “No one’s impressed by name dropping.”

“I was just saying, like— You don’t even know who he is, do you?”

“No.”

The gate rolled upward with a loud crash. Alan removed the key and used another to unlock the front door.

“Then how is it name dropping?”

“For one, I heard the way you said ‘my friend.’ It’s my job to notice these things. You think it’s cool that you know a big novelist, which it is, but it’s not something to brag about. You don’t know about half the people I know.”

“That’s a pretty braggy thing to say, too, Alan.”

“I’m just messing with you, Samir.” Alan’s tone didn’t change in the slightest. He pushed the front door open. They walked inside. The bank had old bones, marble pillars leading up to a high, domed ceiling and brass gates atop dark wood counters, although some modern adjustments had been made, particularly to the building’s facade. Much of the original stone

exterior had become hidden by steel and large panes of tinted glass with printed-on advertisements.

Alan began to walk Samir through his opening ceremony. Lights on, check doors and windows, unlock the door to the registers, unlock the bathrooms, make sure the security feed was operational. As they wandered through the building, other employees started to arrive. Some greeted Alan with a cheerful hello, while others only gave an obligatory nod of acknowledgement. Alan would say, *I hate that woman* or *he's a sweetheart* or *I think she wants to fuck me*. Five minutes before opening, Alan took Samir back to his office. It was a cramped gray room with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling over a wooden desk.

“If you get tired, this is where you can come to rest.”

“I’m doing what you’re doing,” Samir replied. “I won’t rest unless you rest.”

Alan snorted. He reached down into one of his desk drawers and pulled out another hat identical to his own.

“Wear this,” said Alan. “It’ll keep people from paying too much attention to you. And leave all your shit back here. You’re my shadow today, I don’t want you unnecessarily distracted.”

Samir nodded and accepted the hat. He left all his belongings in the room save for the recorder, which he slipped into his shirt pocket. Alan took his post by the front entrance. Samir followed suit. He clicked on the recorder.

“Apologies for not keeping things chronological,” said Samir. “But, I think I still haven’t figured out how to switch my journalist brain over to a biographer brain. So I gotta ask, because it’s on my mind, how’d you end up with this job?”

“You know how.”

“No, I meant, like, why here?”

“Well, as you may know, after what happened, I was pretty much blacklisted from every venue across the country. Almost every person who’d met me after 2009 blocked my number.”

“Almost?”

“I had a few private supporters. Of course, none of them could publicly take my side.”

“That must have hurt.”

Alan shrugged.

“I mean, you know, part of the job. Anyway, old friend of mine, has a very different kind of security company than the one I had.” He gestured to his surroundings. “This was the highest paying position he could find me. The bank didn’t know who I was, or didn’t care anyhow.”

“You like it?”

A woman walked through the front door.

“Yeah, you know, it’s fine—hi ma’am—people are nice, most of the time I’m just standing here with nothing to do. Thinking lots of thoughts. Gets me home on time. I’m not too far away from my family.”

“Yeah, what do you do all day?”

“Literally just think, Samir. Nothing happens here. I have so much time to think. I think about random shit. I play little mind games. Sometimes I just look at the people who come in and figure out which pickup line I’d use on ‘em.”

“Have you ever picked up someone on the job?”

“Oh yeah, all the time. You’re talkin’ to a real ladies man, Samir.”

He laughed.

“You mentioned you had a company?” said Samir.

“Yup, Brown Executive Protection. At the height, I had about a hundred people working under me.”

“All security?”

“Other than managers and whatnot, yeah, but officially, we referred to it as executive protection. Different types, though. Event security, personal protection, security consultation, chaperoning, surrogacy and negotiations.” He chuckled. “Personal shopping.”

“When was this?”

“Took over the company in 2005—morning, sir—and then I handed it over in 2019, ‘bout 6 months after I became unhireable. Nobody wanted anything to do with the company, so the choice was to either stick to my guns and bring down over a hundred people with me, or give my partner sole ownership and let him publicly shit all over me to cover their asses.”

“Partner?”

“Hector Iona. Drove the fuckin’ thing into the ground within a year anyway.”

“You still talk?”

“Sometimes, mostly on Facebook. Why do you stand like that?”

“Like what?”

Samir tried to analyze his stance in the reflection of the polished marble across from him.

“You stand like you’re afraid of the wind,” said Alan. He tapped the side of his foot against Samir’s. “Keep your feet shoulder width apart. Roll your shoulders back. Stand up straight.” Samir obliged. “How do you hang with the most dangerous people on the planet but can’t even keep your chin up?”

Samir shrugged. “Maybe that’s why they trust me,” he said. “Not intimidating or whatever.”

“Well, here, when you’re with me, put your fuckin’ chest out.”

Samir didn’t respond. They stood in silence for some time, greeting the incoming customers and bidding a good day to the exiting ones.

“So, like, how did you hire your executive protectors?” said Samir.

“I stopped hiring personally once we got big enough that I could have people handle it for me, but my process consisted of two in-person meetings. The people were usually referred by friends or peers, so in the first meeting, I’d just get to know them, ask some general questions, and most importantly, I’d lay down some important points for the second meeting.” He was speaking with vigorous passion. Samir could see the excitement in his body language.

“What does that mean?”

“The second meeting is more of a classic interview. I sit ‘em down and we talk some more and then I say, ‘lastly, I’m going to ask you eighteen questions.’ Now, there’s a strategy behind every question. Some of the questions, I already know the answers to. In fact, some of the questions are questions I’ve already asked them before. Some of them are seemingly irrelevant. And others require a demonstration of great memory and attention.”

“What are the questions?”

“Here, you wanna do it? Sounds like you wanna do it.”

Samir didn’t particularly want to do it, but he hadn’t yet seen Alan as excited about anything the way he was about this.

“Sure,” he said.

“Now, normally we’d be sitting down, but you get the idea. Okay, first off, what’s your favorite color?”

“Purple.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York. Well, London originally.”

“Do you have any allergies?”

“No. Well, yes, dairy, but just barely.”

“Do you smoke tobacco?”

“Not regularly.”

“Just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Unless it’s not a yes or no question.”

“Yes.”

“Do you smoke marijuana?”

“Um, yes.”

“*Just* ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

Samir nodded.

“Do you drink alcohol?”

“Yes.”

“Are both of your parents alive?”

“Yes.”

“What was your address when you were eight years old?”

“There were a few.”

“Name one.”

“9 Old Jamaica Road.”

“What is your maternal grandfather’s name?”

“Omar Rahman.”

“Are you married or currently in a relationship?”

“Yes.”

“Have you served in the military?”

“Not officially, no.”

“Just, no.”

“No.”

“Have you ever shot a gun?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever seen someone die?”

“Yes.”

“What was the fifth question I asked you?”

Samir looked at the ceiling and tapped his fingers together.

“Um, ‘do you drink alcohol?’”

“Good. Have you ever killed someone? Under any circumstances.”

“No.”

“What is the worst injury you’ve ever had?”

Samir held up his right hand.

“What is your favorite season?”

“Winter.”

“What is *my* favorite color?”

Samir racked his brain, twitching slightly.

“Green,” he said after a few moments.

Alan looked at him with wide eyes.

“Son of a bitch, you caught it,” he said.

Samir shrugged.

“It’s kind of what I do. I listened to the tape again yesterday. And I thought it was weird how you threw that into your story, to be honest.”

“You know, you’re one of maybe fifteen people to get that last one right.”

“Like I said, it’s kind of what I do.” He paused for a moment. “So, you make sure to mention that to every potential employee on your first meeting?”

Alan nodded.

“It doesn’t even matter all that much. I’ve hired plenty of people who didn’t catch it. It’s just, like, a fun thing. But I have to admit, I’m impressed.”

Samir didn’t think it wasn’t nearly as tricky as Alan thought. At least in the way it was presented to him, he figured most people would have been able to recall such a fact.

“So, depending on how they answer, you hire them?” he said.

“Yes, but it’s not so much that there are right and wrong answers. Moreso, I take their answers into consideration in addition to the profile I’ve already created.”

“So, would you hire me?”

“Probably not,” said Alan, much too quickly. “Although, you do have certain skills that I would want to take advantage of from time to time.”

“Right, yeah, makes sense,” said Samir. “You think I could get there?”

“Where?”

“To the point of being hireable.”

“Yeah, yeah, you got the right shoulders. You just gotta eat a lot more,” he said. “And dump the girl.”

Samir chuckled, though he heard the strain in Alan's voice when he said it. He was all too serious. They spoke for a while longer about the perks and pitfalls of the security business in all its shapes and forms. At a certain point, around lunchtime, Samir remembered why he was there in the first place.

"We should probably get back to the story you were telling me the other day."

"Ah, yes." Alan rocked on his heels and brought his cap to his chest. "My life story. Where did we leave off?"

"You were seventeen, dad had been taken away by men in suits and you're in Hawaii now with Mia and Kimo."

"Right, right. So, I spent about a year out in Hawaii, finishing up high school. It was nice, you know? Having a family all together in one place."

"Do you ever wish you could have made that for yourself? A wife and kids, I mean."

Samir knew it was probably too soon to ask such a question, but it came out before he could catch it. Alan held his body still and kept his face forward. Samir, on the other hand, sunk into his shoulders. In the back of his mind, he considered how relieved he would be if Alan were to just shut the whole project down.

"So, beginning of my senior year of high school was pretty rough." Alan continued in his same tone. Samir ruffled his brow. "I went to the local public school, so everyone there had known each other practically since they were born. I was the weird army kid with no friends whose Dad's arrest was the biggest news story on the island of last decade. I made one close friend, a neighbor who I started carpooling with. And that was Hector, who I was telling you about before. His mother was friends with Mia's mother, Kimo's grandmother who, I guess, was also my grandmother. You know, Kimo kept his mother's last name, Makani, so I'm the only

Brown left. Grandma's name was Laila. Sweet woman sometimes, but most of the time she was a bitter fucking tyrant. Mia's car was taken by the feds, too, because Dad bought it for her, so Laila let her borrow hers. Mia got a full-time job, so I couldn't really go anywhere that wasn't along the way. It's crazy, man, she put all of her faith in my dad. And he let her down."

Alan finished his sentence with a solemn sigh. His face was otherwise unchanged. Samir found Alan's personality to be one of the more confounding cases he'd ever been presented with. At times, Alan's words were tender, at other times they seemed forced. And as a result, Samir was developing a faint suspicion that perhaps some of what he was saying was untrue. Although, it was still too early to be sure.

"Did she ever express any resentment about that?" said Samir.

"Not really. She was badass, man. Held it down for Kimo, who did express a lot of fucking resentment."

"He was six, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but he was a firecracker. He couldn't have spent more than a year in total with his dad, but he never let that shit go. And, I mean, rightly so. Whatever, he found a way to live with it."

"Did you?"

Again, Alan did not immediately respond.

"You know, I haven't been grilled like this since the FBI in 2011."

Samir laughed.

"Part of the process, man." he said. "Did you guys ever hear from him again? Your dad?"

"Not only did we not hear from him, I could never even find him."

"Really? I would've thought with all your connections, you would have been able to—"

“Yeah, I mean I could have looked harder. Truth is, I don’t think I really wanted to have that conversation. So... where were we?”

“Senior year of high school, you were talking about Mia.”

Alan spoke for some time about his weekend jobs, helping raise his brother, his friendship with Hector, his girl troubles and subsequent girl successes, his frequent physical altercations. Alan was the mysterious military brat with the family issues and the worldly knowledge. He was dangerous, but alluring. Aggressive, but thoughtful. He managed to do well in school despite his overwhelming obligations and complicated social life. He was accepted to a college in Berlin, where he went to study philosophy and stayed in the home of Nels Finkel. When Nels would come by the house, which was not often, they never once spoke about what had happened to Alan’s father. He reconnected with Sophie and in his sophomore year, after he’d had his first brush with total freedom, they began to date.

Alan checked his watch and told Samir that it was lunch time. There was a cafe down the block with good sandwiches and a quiet atmosphere. It was on a narrow street cut between rows of skyscrapers. They sat at a small metal table out front on the sidewalk. Alan asked if they could take a break from the storytelling while they ate. Samir agreed and switched off his recorder. Alan ordered a chicken parmesan sandwich and Samir ordered a turkey and arugula.

“Do you have opinions?” said Alan.

The question caught Samir off guard.

“What? What do you mean?”

“Like, do you feel passionately about things? You don’t express yourself much, Samir.”

“Yeah, of course I have opinions.”

“Like what, what do you care about?”

“I mean, you know, poverty, gun control—”

”Sure, everybody cares about that stuff.”

“Not everybody.”

“Yeah, but you know what I mean. What do *you* care about, Samir?”

“What do I care about...” Samir tapped his chin. Alan took a massive bite out of the sandwich. “I guess, my girlfriend, Joanna. My family, my parents. My work. Honesty. Immigration.”

“See, now we’re getting somewhere,” Alan said through a mouth full of food. “So why—”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Alan swallowed hard. He gave a coy shrug. Clearly he didn’t like to be cut off.

“Why now? Why do you want to tell your story now?”

“Why not?”

“Well, I mean the thing with Al Rio happened, like, three years ago. I know you never spoke on it with anyone who asked. And I know there were people asking. It’s well documented that you declined every opportunity to make a statement on the matter. So, I just want to know, why do you want to clear your name now?”

“I never said I wanted to clear my name.”

“Okay, let’s say you don’t want to clear your name. Why do you want to tell your story right now?”

“A man can’t want the world to know his story before he’s gone?”

“Before you’re gone? What do you mean, before you’re gone?”

Alan shifted in his metal chair.

“I just, you know, I– I– I’m getting up there. And I think I have quite a story to tell.”

“Dude, you’re forty-seven. I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Alan gripped the cool arms of his chair. Samir was right. If there was anything he didn’t know, he should be made aware. But, Alan didn’t like being challenged, or questioned. He responded calmly.

“You will know everything you need to know when you need to know it.” Samir wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but he was sure he shouldn’t push it further. “We should probably get back to work.” Alan stood up and left without waiting for Samir. When they returned to the bank, Samir asked if they could keep talking about Alan’s youth. So, he spent the rest of the day hearing about Alan’s volatile relationship with Sophie. He was closer to her than anyone else in the world. Together, they developed wild schemes to make money fast. Fake IDs, fake passports, coke, weed, alcohol, essays, books. If they couldn’t get it themselves, they knew someone who could. With their combined network of connections, they were virtually unstoppable.

“It felt like one of those things that would inevitably crash, you know,” said Alan. “But it didn’t. Sure, we’d fight and she’d get all crazy and threaten to call the police or whatever. And, you know, I had my own moments. At the time, I thought she was the only one who was off her rocker. In retrospect, I think we were both just young and dumb. We were both off our fuckin’ shit. That’s when I started drinking a lot. And when I started working out even more. I’d never been addicted to anything in my life. Never drank coffee, never needed any drugs, never overate. But something about the way Sophie made me feel back then. I was obsessed. I’d work out, go to class, work out again and then drink until I passed out. I was addicted to Sophie, too. She practically lived with me. Nels didn’t care. Probably didn’t notice.

“So, we had our operation going. I finally had money again. And, you know it’s fucked up, but Mia and Laila were helping pay for my tuition, so I was able to save up a lot of what I

was making. I paid them back later on, to be clear, but I'm not gonna act like I always planned to. Classes were easy. I focused on what interested me and I had other people that I could pay to take care of the shit I didn't like as much. It was surreal. I was getting good grades, I had a beautiful girl by my side, who was modeling outside of school, I was making more money than I knew what to do with, I was in the best shape of my life. And then, start of senior year, Sophie had been out in Hawaii with me and things were great. She was great. Got along great with my family, of course. So, we get back to Berlin and she tells me she wants to start sleeping with other people. It was a fight, but more because it was something she wanted than something I wasn't okay with. Our bond was still undeniable. It sounds corny, but we got each other in a way that couldn't just be forgotten. We kept our little enterprise going. By that time we'd expanded way beyond college students. We still lived together, too, but we started fucking other people. And that's when I developed my third addiction."

"Third?" said Samir.

"I'm an addict, Samir. And I'm addicted to three things." Alan held three fingers up in Samir's face. "In order: Fitness, alcohol, and sex. Those are my three vices."

"Do you still struggle with your addictions?"

Alan laughed.

"Clearly you don't know any addicts or you wouldn't be asking such a stupid question."

"Well, tell me about it."

"Not right now. Not here."

"Then tell me about your business dealings."

"Don't say it like that, you sound like a cop."

"Alright well tell me about your fucking... I don't know, operation."

Alan spent the next few hours discussing his various dealings and the drama that came with them. One woman entering the bank asked him why he looked so familiar and he said he gets that a lot. His co-workers were staring all day, clearly envious that he had company, but no one said a thing. The bank closed at 6 PM and Samir followed Alan back to the office where they had left their bags.

“Anyway, senior year was wild. Sophie and I were doing our own shit, but still very much in business and in love with each other. We would go out and throw parties and travel and I’d go to her family’s house for the weekend. But, you know, there was that distance. It wasn’t bad. It was just different. I fucked a teacher once.”

Samir choked.

“Cool,” he said. He didn’t know what else to say. “How’d that happen?”

They walked back to the front of the bank.

“Well, I was... me, you know. It was Ms. Weber, she taught a philosophy class. She had some wild philosophical justification for it, too. Like a full on essay, bibliography, everything, for why we should be able to hook up. I don’t even remember. Anyway, it wasn’t anything too special, just came to mind. She never got caught. Of course everyone thought I was a legend, but to be honest it felt kind of weird. It felt weird to be that kind of person.”

“What kind of person is that?”

They stepped outside.

“Someone I never thought I would be. Someone who’s fit as hell and sells drugs and bags teachers. I was the one people came to when they had issues. I broke up fights. I started fights. I went from having one best friend to having a whole fucking army of people who would do

whatever I wanted and a supermodel by my side and more money than I knew what to do with and not a problem in the fucking world. And then, you know, I graduated.”

It was a dramatic way to end the story. It was clear that Alan knew it, too.

“You’re really teasing me, Alan,” Samir said.

Alan smiled. It was a genuine smile Samir hadn’t really seen before.

“It’s one of the things I’m good at, kid.”

“So when do I see you again?”

“You really need to consider the way you say things, Samir. You’re treating this like it was a successful date.”

“Wasn’t it?”

They both laughed.

“Thursday,” Alan said. “Come by the gym in Brooklyn. I’ll text you.”

The men parted ways. Alan went home to work out and shower before hitting the club. Samir went home to tell Joanna about his day, far more enthusiastic than before. He felt his excitement was almost dangerous. His feet hurt like hell and he realized he’d accidentally taken the hat home with him. That was the night he started to write.

* * *

That evening, across town, Hector Iona was closing up his gym. He had stayed late because he liked to work out after everyone left. He was built similarly to Alan, although he was a bit taller. He was bald with glasses and he always wore a thin black hoodie with black sweatpants. He had white headphones over his ears. It was late, but he had nowhere to be. His

wife and daughters were already asleep. As he trotted around the gym, humming to himself, he received a call from an unknown number. He stepped out onto the street, contemplating whether or not he should answer. Before he could make up his mind, he felt two hands grip his shoulders and two more on his waist. He dropped his phone as he was sucked back into the gym. Hector was strong. Very strong. And he had spent much of his life preparing for situations like this. But, his best efforts to fend off the attackers only resulted in more fear and frustration. It was too dark to see anything and he had lost his glasses in the struggle. In a matter of minutes he found himself tied to a bench in the locker room. He made the decision to bolt the benches to the floor five years prior when remodeling the place. He never thought it would come to be something he regretted. He heard a voice.

“Lights!”

The light switched on to reveal a grin of crooked teeth just inches from his face. It was a man he had seen before, but couldn't quite place. He was noticeably clean, with a thin mustache and burgundy button-down shirt tucked into black dress pants. His jet black hair was shiny and gelled. He spoke with an Italian accent.

“Good evening, Mr. Iona,” he said.

“Fuck off.”

Hector flailed around as much as he could. The clean man gestured to another man standing by the lightswitch. He was almost identical, but clearly younger and a bit stockier.

“My name is Antonio,” said the clean man. “That guy over there by the light is my little brother Alessandro. We're here on behalf of Moses Chancellor.”

Hector calmed himself.

“I don't have any business with Moses anymore,” he said.

“Mr. Chancellor would beg to differ. I am here to personally deliver the message that a debt is still owed to my boss in the sum of fifty thousand dollars, plus an additional interest of twenty thousand dollars given the several years it has taken for you to pay us back.”

Alessandro strolled over to his brother. He rolled up his sleeves and slipped on a pair of black leather gloves from his back pocket.

“I already paid Moses back for everything I borrowed. We’re square,” said Hector.

“Yes, I can see why you would believe that, but the reason Mr. Chancellor sent us is to clear up any confusion. He figured you were under such an assumption, given your recent radio silence, and wanted to make perfectly clear that you are still very much in business with us.”

“So what, you can just decide that I owe you more money whenever you feel like it? I stuck to my word! I worked hard to pay you motherfuckers back!”

Hector was screaming. Antonio nodded to his brother who proceeded to slap Hector in the face with the back of his hand. Hector yelped, more out of anger than pain.

“Mr. Chancellor wants to make you aware that he feels a greater debt is owed due to the business he has brought to your gym since his initial investment. He also feels that his help has been taken for granted.”

“That’s bullshit! I’ve done everything you asked. You dumbasses can’t just threaten me for more money because you *want to*.”

“Well, you’re right about one thing, Mr. Iona. This is a threat. And it is imperative that you not forget it. If you don’t comply, This will come back around to more than just you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before.”

“Perhaps we should reach out to our friend, Mr. Brown, about your unwillingness to cooperate.”

Hector chuckled through gritted teeth.

“Alan?” he said. “Do whatever the fuck you want to Alan, I couldn’t care less.”

Alessandro bent over and sucker punched him in the cheek.

“Ah, shit, dude. Don’t fuck with my face. How am I gonna explain this to my family?”

“You should be more worried about how you’re going to explain this to my boss.”

“Oh, your boss can go fuck himself, you–”

He felt the hard leather fist come down on his face again. And then a heavy boot against his bent leg. He let out a cry of agony. He was nearly in tears.

“Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, you fuck!”

“Your feelings about Mr. Chancellor have been noted and will be relayed,” said Antonio.

“For the time being, worry about getting us our money. We’ll be back to speak with you again next week.”

“Yeah, whatever, can you please just let me go home?”

Antonio laughed. His brother did the same.

“No, but we will not hurt you anymore for the moment. Have a good evening, Mr. Iona. And remember, fifty thousand dollars plus twenty thousand interest. Don’t let the interest get any higher.”

Hector was writhing around again, his back twice as wide as the bench it was pressed against. The brothers said nothing more. Antonio waved goodbye as they stepped out of the room. Hector let out an enraged groan. He sat in silence for a moment, trying to find a way to escape, but nothing came to mind. He heard footsteps again and Antonio peeked his head back through the doorway.

“Hey, can my brother have one of the shirts behind the desk? He likes that shade of red.”

Hector wanted to cry. Instead, he let out the loudest scream of his life.

“Cool, thank you,” said Antonio. He left again.

Hector was tied to the bench until 7 AM, when one of his regulars was walking by and found the cracked phone and crushed glasses outside the half-open door.

* * *

Ducky’s Boxing Club was in an old brick building in Brooklyn Heights. Nearly fifteen years earlier, Alan purchased Ducky’s from a down-and-out former client and built it up from near ruin. It was purchased in friendly competition with Hector, who had opened his own gym less than a year before, with a generous loan from Moses Chancellor. At the time, it was called Ace of Spades. In the first year, people began to call Alan ‘Ducky’ due to his impressive evasion tactics in the ring and it ultimately stuck, both to him and the building. After the incident in 2018, he was no longer able to maintain the gym on his own, socially or financially. So, he sold it to Sammo and Neon, a young couple from the West Coast who promised to keep its “old-school vibe” and, more importantly, allowed him to use the gym at any time, no charge. He would see his friends, boxers who took the craft much more seriously. A lot of them didn’t have other jobs. They trained at the gym and then they would go fight and hopefully win some money and then come back and train some more. Or they were retired, but still wanted to stay in shape.

Thursday was Alan’s half-day at the bank. He would work until 1 and then take the A train to Brooklyn. Whenever he walked in, it was like a family reunion. Men of all different shapes and sizes with wrapped hands waving and hollering, *Hey Ducky!* and *Alan, my man!*.

Sometimes he came to work out, other times a friend would ask him to take over a training session.

When Samir walked in, he was greeted with stares. Gorilla-sized men stopped their punching and jump-roping and turned to observe the long twig, dressed in brown corduroy pants and a loose t-shirt, who had surely blown in through the wrong door. The gym was smaller than Samir had imagined. There was a large ring in the center with speed bags and double bags off to the side. There were five heavy bags suspended from the ceiling, scattered throughout, and another, smaller ring next to a mismatched crop of exercise machines and weights and medicine balls. Stickers and graffiti and posters covered every inch of the walls. A young woman with neon green hair popped out from behind a little wooden desk next to the front door.

“Hi, welcome to Ducky’s. Can I help you?”

Samir jumped. He turned around.

“Yeah, hi, I’m looking for—”

“Hey, Sammy!”

Alan emerged through a swinging locker room door, wiping sweat from his face with a rag. It was the first time Alan had called him by a nickname. He turned to the woman behind the counter.

“Sammo, meet Sammy,” he said, laughing at himself. “This is Samir Stevens, the man helping me write my autobiography.”

Sammo gave a polite wave. Alan slung his arm over Samir’s shoulder. A crowd began to amass around them. Alan was ebullient. The men told Samir how lucky he was to be able to tell such a story or playfully asked why he was interested in such a boring old man like Alan or offered themselves up for an interview. It was strange for Samir, seeing Alan amongst friends.

He had presented his life as an incredibly solitary one, but in that place, Samir could tell, people looked up to him. They enjoyed his company. They liked him. Alan introduced Samir to each man and woman individually. One was a heavyweight champion, one was a promising young kid, one was absolute shit but everyone liked to keep him around. Samir met Alan's sparring partner, who they called Ortega. He barely spoke. Alan gave Samir a tour of the facility. He made sure to point out what he'd upgraded himself and what they had done after he left. They ended the tour at Alan's locker.

“So, Alan, I wanna talk to you about some of these people—”

“Aht aht.” Alan held up his hand. “We're not talking about anything yet. We have to do something first.”

Alan reached into his locker and pulled out a pair of red boxing gloves and yellow hand wraps. He handed the gloves to Samir.

“Try these on, they should fit you,” he said.

Samir knew he couldn't decline. He slipped on the gloves. They fit well. Alan took them off again.

“Knew it,” he said. “I'm good at things like that. You know how to wrap your hands?”

Samir shook his head.

“Of course not. Alright, sit here, let me do it.”

Samir took a seat on the nearby bench and Alan sat beside him. He grabbed Samir's left hand and turned it over. He began to wrap. Loop the thumb, around the palm a few times, fold back and forth over the knuckles, around the palm again, between each finger, around the palm again, and then around the wrist. Repeated for the right hand, but with one less finger. Alan handled Samir's hands with care. He could feel the control as Alan almost robotically wrapped

them. Neither man spoke. It was a meditative experience for both, but each for a very different reason. Alan stood up when he finished.

“Alright, how does it feel?”

Samir squeezed his hands. They were tight.

“Yeah, good. Fine. Thanks,” he said.

“Good, follow me.”

They walked back into the main room, across the gym to the smaller ring. Alan grabbed some practice gloves from a nearby stool and slipped them on.

“Okay, so you gotta stand like this.”

Alan stood, hunched over, left foot forward, arms raised a few inches from his face, palms inward. Samir did the same.

“Good, now there are six basic punches, to start out.”

“One.” Left jab.

“Two.” Cross jab.

“Three.” Left hook.

“Four.” Right hook.

“Five.” Right uppercut.

“Six.” Left uppercut.

Samir began to timidly mimic the movements. Alan called out *One, One, One, Two, One* and thrust his hands forward to meet Samir’s.

“Come on, you gotta turn your hip more,” Alan said. “Good, yeah, like that, okay, One, One, One, Two, Two, Three, good. Listen, you’re too stiff. Try making sound with each hit.

Some people hiss, some people huff. Just do what feels right and you'll be surprised how much harder you hit. Yeah, exactly, just like that.”

Samir understood almost instantly these men had devoted their whole life to the craft. It was a thrill on par with his journalistic treks through war-torn cities. But the release was even more pleasing and the stakes much lower.

An old, round man hobbled over to the ring. He had a towel slung over his shoulder.

“You got a nice hunch, kid. I want you for a fight.”

Samir began to stutter. His heart raced. He hadn't partaken in any physical combat since high school. The fear was plainly visible on his face. The man laughed.

“Don't listen to him,” said Alan.

The old man cracked a smile

“I'm just fuckin' with you. No need to panic,” he said.

Samir didn't know what to say. He wondered how well he would have actually done if he had been put in the ring.

“You're lucky to know such a generous person,” said the old man. “Sure he can be a prick sometimes but Alan's a good boy. And you can quote me on that.”

“Thanks, I just might,” said Samir.

“Alright enough sap,” said Alan. “Thanks for the kind words, Nicky, but we have some training to do.”

Nicky gave a dismissive wave and walked away.

“Yeah, about that, Alan,” said Samir. “I think we have some other—”

“One!” Samir threw a jab. “One! Listen, you're on my turf, you play by my rules.”

Alan spoke in a less serious manner than usual. Samir threw another jab. It felt like they were kids on the playground. Laughing and moving and insulting each other.

They spent twenty more minutes in the ring. Samir learned to dodge and block and step correctly. When they were finished, Samir's shirt was soaked in sweat. Alan was still bone dry. He walked over to the counter and asked Neon for a black t-shirt with DUCKY'S BOXING CLUB printed in pink text on the front. He tossed it across the room to Samir, who caught it between his gloved hands.

Back in the locker room, hands free once again, Samir changed into the tight-fitting shirt.

"Fun, huh?" said Alan.

"Yeah, I- I- I get it. Like, I get why you guys love it so much."

Alan smiled.

"Let's go out front," he said. "There's a place we can sit and talk."

They found a black metal bench on the Brooklyn sidewalk, facing the street and the row of identical brick buildings on the other side. Samir clicked on his recorder.

"What do you need to know now?" said Alan.

"What happened after college?"

"Ah, yes, the golden years. Let's see."

Alan locked his fingers together and pressed his head down into them.

"So, after I graduated, Sophie and I... I mean, it was rough. For a few reasons. First off, I wanted to move to New York and she wanted to stay in Europe. So, that was drama. And then there was also the matter of our business ventures. See, we had a few clients who, you know, wouldn't be so easy to just cut off. The first issue had a rough, but necessary solution. I broke up with Sophie. I was madly in love with her still, but sometimes it's easier to just cut someone off

altogether, you know? I gotta tell you, Sammy, I felt terrible. She was bawlin' her eyes out. Called me all types of shit. I was the same. It was all true in one way or another. But it was kinda vicious. She said I was a cold, greedy, stupid American boy and I told her she was a just another crazy European chick and that was the last time we spoke for a long time. Far as the business went, I had a freshman kid who owed me some money, so he took over for me. And as far as I know, he handled it well."

"You made him take over for you?"

"I mean, sort of, he wanted to, but also, yeah, he didn't really have a choice."

"You don't feel guilty about that?"

"Nah, he was fine. Besides, that's the way these things go. Once you allow yourself to become part of that world, you don't really get out of it. But, anyway, this is my story, not his. I went to New York, where I connected with a friend of Nels. Guy by the name of Ernesto Bernini. Real fuckin' character, man. He had, like, a rat face and his legs were super long and his torso was super short and round. He was entertainment business-adjacent. That's the best way I can put it. I wasn't really sure what he did, officially. But, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do either, and the best paying job he had for me was event security for one of his subsidiaries. I gotta say, it fit me well. I was still working out like crazy. I loved being the guy to tell you what you couldn't do. The small venue jobs were the best because people would get particularly belligerent and we'd get to bust a couple heads. I made some friends, no one long-lasting. I can get you names. But we'd work whatever shitty festival or concert or fuckin' fair and then we'd find a bar close by and black out. I'd wake up, sometimes in my own bed—I had a nice little spot, one bedroom with a decent kitchen and a good view, not far from here, actually. Place like that today would cost a fortune. Sometimes I'd wake up in someone else's bed. Sometimes I'd be alone,

sometimes there'd be a girl, or two girls, or a girl and a guy. To be honest, I couldn't tell you what I did with who. Those days were... a blur. It was fine. I'd wake up late and hungover and I'd go work out for two or three hours and then I'd have another drink to even me out and then I'd get to whatever the job was around five or six. We'd get it done no problem. I'd sneak a sip every once in a while. This one guy, Rick, his roommate sold coke, so, you know, that came in handy for the jobs that ran late. Then, we'd go drink till we couldn't stand and find people to fight or to fuck. Usually both. I swear, if our clients knew the constant state we were in, we woulda never got hired. Ernesto probably woulda killed us, too. He almost did kill me once. I was about a year in and the drinking had gotten really bad. It was at the point that I'd have to make myself throw up before I worked out just to get through it. I was barely eating. I was compensating with more coke. My days were just blending together. And one night I had a big job, some big fuckin' piano type guy. And my boss put me in charge of his personal detail. And everything was fine, I was off my ass, but it was pretty low effort work. Most of the time, people don't try any shit. So we're walking down the hall back to his dressing room after the show's over. And I'm fighting for my fucking life, like I got my flask in one hand and a lil' baggy in the other, pretty much just goin' back and forth trying to keep myself balanced. And I shit you not, we're a hundred feet from his dressing room, and I just pass out. No dizziness, no warning, just, *boom!* Black. Nothing. I fall on to him, yeah I see your face, but this isn't even the worst part."

"It gets worse?" said Samir.

"I shit my pants, Sammy!" He was cackling. "I shit my pants. After falling on this little old fuckin' music star."

"Jesus."

“They took me to the hospital. Of course, they found all the drugs and alcohol in my system.”

“How did it make you feel? To— to embarrass yourself like that?”

“How did it make me feel? Sammy, I felt like a fucking dumbass who couldn’t handle his shit. What kinda question is that? But the humiliation wasn’t over. See, when I left the hospital, Ernesto was waiting out front for me in one of his cars. Now, I say ‘one of’ because usually he’s got a driver. A chauffeur. But this time, it’s just him behind the wheel of a big white cadillac. He calls out to me and makes me sit in the front seat and he says to me, I’ll never forget this part, he says to me, in his weird accent, ‘Alan. You’re a damn fool.’ Just like that, ‘Alan, you’re a damn fool.’ So I’m just like, yeah, I know that, I’m sorry, forgive me, it won’t happen again, whatever. But he’s like, no, ‘that’s not enough. You represent my company and by embarrassing yourself you also embarrass my company.’ He told me he was gonna go easy on me because he likes Nels and he likes my father—now, keep in mind I didn’t even know he knew my father. It was a strange thing to realize. That there are actually people out there looking out for me and I might not even know it. But he tells me I’m being transferred to a different outfit within the company. This is a smaller, more VIP, much higher-stakes executive protection job. And I’ll be working under a man who served as Ernesto’s own personal security for many years. So, I’m like, great, I’m not fired. Sounds like I’m being promoted, even.” Alan laughed. “I had no idea whatsoever what I was getting into, Sammy.”

Alan leaned forward and let his gaze follow a woman walking up the sidewalk. He closed his eyes. Something unnerved Samir about Alan addressing him as ‘Sammy.’ It wasn’t a name he had ever particularly embraced, and no one really used it other than Joanna and his parents. But, it wasn’t worth making a fuss about it. Alan continued.

“Ernesto gives me the week off to clean myself up and then tells me to be at the Chinatown Y at 7 AM the following Monday. So, I go home, beat myself up a bit for bein’ a fucking idiot, go out, try to find someone to distract me from the shame. That was actually around the time my mom found me. The timing worked out well. She saw me in the background of some news broadcast and instantly recognized me. Said I looked just like my father. I thought I looked more like her. She was still living in Wisconsin, but she didn’t call me until she’d already gotten to New York. We met up, had coffee, she kept touching my face. But she couldn’t give me any answers. I asked why she hadn’t tried to find me sooner, she said she didn’t know. I asked what my father did, she said she didn’t know. I asked why she was here, now, and guess what? She said she didn’t know. She was nice enough, don’t get me wrong. We just didn’t have much to talk about. I already had Mia, and this other woman had no idea how to treat me as her son. So, she stayed with me for a few days. It was awkward and we didn’t break any ground. Nothing more than polite conversation. And then she left. We talk occasionally. But it always feels like she’s just reaching out because she’s obligated to. That’s life, though, Sammy. Sometimes things fall flat. Sometimes there are no answers.”

“She didn’t know anything about your dad?”

“Nothing she’s ever told me. Anyway, enough of that. Before I know it, it’s Monday and I get to the gym, and there’s one guy there. Older gentleman. Tall and fit with a gray buzzcut like an eighties action hero. And me, I’m twenty three, my hair’s long, my clothes are baggy, I think I know everything, but I actually know nothing. And this guy right here, his name was Steve Jackson. Military, of course, fought in like three wars, *voluntarily*. So, yeah, literally an eighties action hero. And sixties and seventies.”

“So, are you... not a fan of the military?” said Samir.

Alan leaned in and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Honestly,” he said. “Off the record, I think most of those dopes are wasting their lives away for a bum cause. Like, okay, yeah, thank you for your service, et cetera. Whatever. It just pains me to see so many young kids being used as a shield in unwinnable wars. But I’m too old to be saying shit like that. And I got plenty of friends in the military, hell it’s most of the people in my profession, but... I just think there are much safer opportunities out there to be violent.”

“Okay, I’ll make sure to leave that part out,” said Samir. “So, what was the deal with Steve Jackson?”

“Right, right. So, turns out, Steve’s my new boss. And he’s a real hardass, he gives me a whole speech about how we have the *real* clients and these people are important, blah blah blah, you can make it sound all heroic and stuff, right?.”

Samir nodded. He felt like he was talking to a different person. This Alan was excited and energetic. He looked back on this time longingly.

“He gets me in the gym and, you know, I work out every day, even back then, but this was the hardest workout of my life. Boot camp stuff. I didn’t take him seriously at first, but the clients we had, man. Ooh, Sammy. I swear—”

Alan was looking past Samir to the end of the street. His mouth hung open for a few seconds too long. Samir turned his head, trying to find whatever was catching Alan’s gaze. He saw nothing distinct at first. Alan stood up. Samir looked to Alan and looked back and that was when he saw a bald man limping towards them with bruises spotting his face. Samir was stone still with anticipation. Alan mumbled under his breath, too quiet for even himself to hear. He stood up as the man speed-walked into him.

“We need to talk,” said Hector. His head was almost resting on Alan’s shoulder.

“Not here,” said Alan. “Not now. What the fuck are you doing here?”

He glanced at Samir.

“Yes, right now, Alan, this cannot wait.”

“Oh, really, well, I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

“Alan, do you know where I just came from? I came from the airport, because I had to send my family back to stay with Mom on the island. Do you see my face? I’m sorry to interrupt your little publicity stunt.” He waved his hand in Samir’s direction. “But this is fucking important, Alan. You think I wanted to fucking come see you today?”

Alan huffed. He ran his hands through his hair.

“Fine,” he said. He turned to Samir. “Sorry, give me a minute.”

Samir nodded.

Alan walked back into the gym, Hector followed close behind. They stopped in the back corner of the locker room.

“What do you want, Hector? What happened to your face?”

“Fucking Moses is what happened, Al.”

“What— Moses? I thought you paid him off.”

“Well, yeah, I thought so too, but then his little Italian henchmen came and beat me up last night. They said they need seventy thousand dollars.”

“Why?”

“He just... decided, I guess. Some bullshit about interest and investment, but the point is, they threatened me, they threatened my family, and they threatened you.”

“Me? Why me? What did you tell them, Hector?”

“I didn’t say shit, Al. Don’t talk to me like that. If I don’t give them the money, they’re gonna come after you for it. And they’ll probably kill me first.”

Alan slammed his fist into the locker next to him.

“Fuck, Hector! Fuck!” He took a few deep breaths. “What do I have to do with this?”

“I mean, you introduced me. You’re the logical next step if I fail.”

Alan walked in a restrained circle, clenching his fist.

“So, how are you gonna get the money? You got the money?” he said.

“No, I don’t. And the question is, how are *we* gonna get the money, Alan. This is both of our problem now. You should start acting like it.”

“Yeah, still seems more like your problem. I already paid off my debts. And I don’t got the money either way, Hector.”

Hector grabbed Alan's arms and brought their faces close together.

“Listen to me!” he said. “This is serious. We’re both gonna be dead if we don’t figure this out.”

“That’s a bit extreme.”

Hector started to pace.

“Jesus, man, just, like, be serious for a second. Maybe you’ve got nothing left to live for, but I fucking do.”

Alan’s face fell.

“I’ll see if anything can be done,” he said. He started walking towards the door. “And I got plenty to live for!”

Outside, Samir was on his phone. He was looking at Hector Iona's wikipedia page. The picture matched the man he had just seen. The front door swung open. Alan walked by and Samir stood up.

"Not now," said Alan. "I gotta go handle some stuff, I'll text you in a bit."

"But--"

"Not now, Samir! Like I said, I'll text you!" He paused. "I need a fucking drink."

Samir watched Alan disappear around the corner. Behind him, he heard the door open again. It was Hector. Samir caught up with him as he limped away from the building.

"Hi, Mr. Iona, my name is Samir, I'm--"

"No thanks, kid. I know who you are and I'm not participating in Alan's little play for repentance. Trust me, you wouldn't like anything I have to say."

"Actually, I--"

Hector stopped and shoved a finger towards Samir's face.

"There's a lot goin' on right now that you don't know about and I need you to understand that. Your little book is the last thing on my mind right now. No, actually it's not even on my mind. So please, respectfully, with all due respect, fuck off."

Hector kept walking.

Samir's shoulders slumped. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk, unsure what to do or where to go. He texted Joanna to see if she was around. No answer. He texted another friend who he knew was off work and asked if he wanted to go for a drink. No answer. So, he went home and took a bath. Later that evening, he received a text from Alan.

Alan had rushed home to call his accountant. There was not nearly enough disposable cash to pay off even half of what Hector owed. He spent a few hours pacing and drinking and

making calls. He couldn't sell anything. That would take too long. He couldn't reach out to anyone either. Bringing more people in meant putting more people in danger. There was no one left, anyway. Just before he blacked out, he remembered there was one more person he needed to reach out to. He pulled out his phone.

Sorry about earlier. Long story. Come to work tomorrow?

* * *

Samir woke up late. He showered and brushed his teeth and threw on some jeans and a t-shirt and ran out the door with his bag. He arrived at the bank out of breath. Alan reprimanded him for being improperly dressed and for being late. He was back to his usual cold self. Samir gave an insincere apology and asked what he and Hector had talked about the day before.

"Nothing. Just a bit of a mix up. It's fine now, though."

Samir didn't believe him.

"Listen," he said. "If I'm gonna tell your life story, you gotta tell me everything. We can't half-ass this thing."

Alan rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"Yeah, not that part. Nobody needs to know about that part."

"But Alan, isn't that kind of—"

"Buts are for assholes, or whatever they say. Drop it, Samir."

"I don't think that's what they say."

Samir decided not to push Alan further on the subject of the prior day's occurrences. He figured it would be best to save all the pushing for the end of their time together. And he had been making a mental list of things to return to. He clicked on his recorder. Alan shrugged.

"So, that was Hector. Bigger than you made him sound," said Samir.

"Yeah, he's put on some weight."

"I didn't mean it like that, I meant more... naturally big."

"Well, whatever you meant, it's true. He's really letting himself go."

"He didn't seem to view this whole setup too favorably."

"You know, my nephew taught me the term 'hater.' I don't know how. He's only seven, but he's always on his dad's Instagram. Anyway, hater, it's an internet thing for someone who just wants to see you fail no matter what. And that's what Hector is. A hater. I don't know why or when he decided to be a hater, but he's a hater nonetheless."

"Nothing happened between you two?"

"No, not really. I mean, I gave him a goddamn company. I introduced him to some people who have made him a much more successful man than he ever had any right to be. Without me, he'd still be on the island coaching little league football."

"When I spoke to him, he seemed to feel like this whole project was just a publicity stunt for you."

"Yeah, he would. Because that's all he ever thinks about is optics. Most of the time at the expense of what's actually best. Dude has no morals, just vanity through and through."

"So, there's no truth to it? You don't think any of this might be to paint yourself in a better light? To redeem your public persona?"

“What? No. What? I haven’t even— do I seem eager to even talk about that shit? It... hurts. My— I just think I have an important story and I want to tell it. And if you don’t mind, you’re here to listen, so can we get back to it?”

Samir nodded. He was beginning to understand the workings of Alan’s inconsistent demeanor. And Alan was right. Although Samir felt an obligation to challenge his subjects, he was ultimately there to listen and repeat.

“Before Hector showed up, you were telling me about some of your celebrity clients after you started working with Steve Jackson,” said Samir.

Alan shifted into a less guarded stance. He seemed to be good at forgiving.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “You’re in for a wild ride, friend. Now, I think this should really be the bulk of the book. The people will want to hear these stories.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. Ok, so, our very first client was an actress named Lola Blake. You heard of her?”

“No, I don’t—”

“Well, she was a big star at the time. And a real sweet girl, too. And you gotta understand, Samir, this wasn’t no event security like the last job. This was real personal protection. So, I get debriefed on the whole situation. Basically, what I’m told is, she’s got a stalker. Real creepy cat who started by sending fan mail to her agent’s office, but recently found her personal address. Now, her husband was a big producer and he traveled a lot, so he hired us to keep an eye on her. To start, it was simple stuff. Get the door for her, call her cars, hold her bags. The first month we spent working for her, she had nothing going on. She was fun, though. Made little quips and stuff. And, you know, obviously smokin’ hot. So, I’m still twenty-five or

something, and I'm literally personal security for an actress, like..." He mimicked little explosions coming out of his forehead with his hands. "And making bank for it, too. So we go with her to book signings and to her shoots and whenever she needs to go to the store. Now, what Steve told me is that most clients on this level prefer to have their security keep a low profile. Wear normal clothes, keep watch from a distance, that kind of stuff. Not Lola. She wanted the whole world to know she had security. I had to wear a suit and tie every day. Everywhere. But, oof, did she love taking it off."

Samir choked on nothing. Alan whipped his head over with a conniving grin. Samir tried to speak.

"So, you... you had an—"

"Oh, yeah. I mean, can you blame her? I was a handsome young man at her beck and call, twenty four hours, five days a week. God, and her husband. That was a foul man. He always smelled like smoke. Big round belly. One of those people you could tell used to be handsome for, like, the first half of his twenties.

"That must be against the rules, no? To get that intimate with a client?"

"Well, there are two schools of thought on that. On the one hand, you're hired to serve, so anything you're comfortable doing that falls under the umbrella of servitude, you're obligated to do. On the other hand, it's completely unprofessional, it's not in the best interest of the client or the employee, and, I mean, especially with a married client, it best be avoided."

"So, where do you fall?"

"Hey, if you don't get caught, it doesn't matter either way."

"How would you feel if one of your employees slept with a client?"

“Oh, absolutely not. They know not to do that. If I found out about that, they’d be done. Instantly. But these are also different times now. So anyway, it got to a point where I’m literally going to do her shopping on my own. I’ve become so in tune with her taste, I’m picking out what she orders for dinner. And she trusts me. It’s part of the job that can really fuck with you, Samir. You get to know these people better than they know themselves. But the real mindfuck of it all, is when it’s done.” He snapped his fingers. “It’s done. Just like that. Stalker never came after Lola. Her husband wanted to stop spending the money. Boom. Your services are no longer needed. Didn’t see her again until much later. We crossed paths at an event and she seemed to barely remember me. But part of me thinks she was just pretending. She was with her husband. At the time, she gave me a great review, though. It was around that time I got my firearm certification, too.

“I was still a fiend. My days off, I wouldn’t wake up until three in the afternoon and when I did, my head would be pounding. But, you know, shower, do a little coke, go hit the gym for a few hours, I’d be good as new just in time to hit the club again the next night. Work days were the same, but I’d get much less sleep. When I fainted, the doctor said it was just from dehydration. So, I always kept a water bottle with me.”

“Before we move on, could you tell me a little bit more about what it was like working with Lola? Seems like it must have been very... formative.”

Alan did just that, and in far too much detail. When he was done explaining the complexities of being Lola’s right hand, he moved onto the next client, an investment banker going on a business trip to Sarajevo. Alan’s partner on the job was ex-special forces and taught him the most effective way to put someone in a headlock.

Some jobs spanned months at a time, others just a weekend. He would tour around the globe with a high profile celebrity and then go on a family vacation with some silicon valley nerd who was afraid a hit had been put out on him by the Chinese government. Some clients wanted Alan to be an imposing figure, standing a little too close, making everyone aware of the threat he posed. Others didn't want anyone to know he was security at all. He was just an old friend, a part of the posse. It became a masterclass in silent performance. How do you stand to let someone know you can turn their face to mush in a matter of seconds? How do you dress to hide an absurdly fit physique and a holstered gun? Alan maintained his addictions, but he managed to stay completely sober on the job. Only before or after he clocked out did he indulge. Unless it was offered by the client.

After eight years working for Ernesto, who was on the brink of death following a series of bad strokes, Alan purchased the company from him. He brought on Hector, who had recently finished his service in the military, to help him run things. He named it Brown Executive Protection and within a year, he had made enough money, and hired enough employees, to not have to work himself. He was a star. TMZ would catch him on the street and ask questions about celebrity gossip. He would cameo in movies and TV shows his friends were working on. He was investing in tequila brands and fitness centers and a production company in France. He was "the other man" in the tabloids when he was out to lunch with a client. But, he didn't want to stop working. And for the first time, he had the opportunity to take on any job he wanted.

In the following decade, he volunteered to head up several jobs, but there were two clients with whom he formed long-term relationships that moved beyond business. The first was Sophie Butreaux. He reconnected with her at Nels' funeral in a small town outside of Hamburg. She had become a private advisor to a few German politicians. When she was made aware of the

work he did, she began hiring him as her personal protector. They quickly struck up a romantic relationship once again and after a year of dating, he proposed. They were married for eleven years, non-monogamous for most of that time.

The second client Alan became close with was a rapper and singer known as Alonzo Rio. Alan first met him at a club he was considering buying on the Lower East Side. Alonzo, who was going by just Al Rio at the time, was just starting out. He had plans to release his first single on a major label the following week. The two hit it off and, after Alonzo became a massive success, he came to Alan for personal protection.

“Alonzo was a really smart motherfucker,” said Alan. “He branded himself so well. From the day I met him, he just kept shooting upwards. He had all the tools to make himself successful, but I helped, just because I could. My first few gigs with him, I charged him way under what I usually would. It was small venues. The Fonda, Webster hall. It was fun to roll with someone like him. We’d go to some fancy French spot for brunch and he’d order one of everything on the menu and feed half of it to his dogs. And then he was playing the Greek and Radio City and we were going into Gucci and YSL and dropping a hundred K on some shirts. And then it was the fucking Hollywood Bowl and Barclays center and we were having orgies on private jets and tipping the valet with stacks of hundred dollar bills.”

Alan spoke longingly about his time working with Alonzo. They vacationed together. Alan consulted on his business ventures. But when it came time to discuss the incident, he shut down.

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk about that yet,” he said. “I’m getting there, but it’s tough. I’m way too sober. Can we move on for now?”

It was the first time Samir had sensed genuine sadness in Alan's voice. But, he feared Alan might never be ready to talk about it. They skipped over the subject. Alan told stories of other clients. Crazy cleanups, drugs, guns, stolen cars, mistaken identities, fights, threats, more sex, of course. Sophie didn't like that he spent so much time away from home when he didn't have to. When he wasn't working, he lived in Berlin. And he traveled to New York for half of every week to keep the business in check. Alan was detailing a nasty public argument between himself and Sophie which occurred at a benefit in Martha's Vineyard, about a year before they split up, when he saw it was time to close up. As they were heading out, Alan turned to Samir.

"Hey, I'm going to this club tonight, cool spot called Das Liebermachten down in Chelsea. You should come, I can get you on the list."

Clubs weren't exactly Samir's scene.

"Um, yeah," he said. "Let me make sure I don't have anything else. You know, Joanna sometimes schedules things without—"

"Bring her, too. I'd love to meet the girl who's stolen your cold little heart."

Samir displayed a confused smile. He said he'd be in touch. When he proposed the idea to Joanna, she ecstatically demanded that they go. She had been dying to for some time, but it was impossible to get on the list.

* * *

The club entrance was a plain black door in a narrow alley. The man at the entrance had worked for Alan a decade earlier. He worked the door Friday through Tuesday, so those were the nights Alan would show up. Alan had what he referred to as "secret allies" throughout the city.

People in all levels of the security business who still privately supported him. And likely pitied him, too.

When Samir and Joanna arrived, the line stretched out onto the street and around the block. Samir was wearing black jeans and an oversized pink button-down shirt. Joanna, who was wearing a blue sequined dress, had chosen the outfit for him. None of it was Samir's *thing*. The dressing up, the clubs, the drinking, probably. Joanna, however, was right in her element. Their differing lifestyles had never been an issue.

"Do you think we have to wait in this line?" said Samir.

Joanna laughed. She rubbed his arm.

"He said we're on the list right?" she said. Samir nodded. "Then we're good."

Samir followed her up to the doorman who spoke before either of them could say anything.

"Ah, you must be the friends Alan told me about."

"How— how did you know?" said Samir.

"Alan's good at describing people. Part of the job," said the man. "Come on in."

As they were escorted inside, Joanna looked back at Samir and gave him an excited smile. It was then that Samir really began to understand the draw of the lifestyle Alan led. The access, the special treatment, the jealous onlookers. If providing it was even half as thrilling as receiving it, it all made too much sense. The club was two stories high, with a wraparound balcony overlooking the dance floor. There were two bars, one on either side of the room. The allure was already diminishing for Samir as they navigated through the dense crowd of sweaty dancers. The music was some pounding, pulsating bass and synth drone.

Alan was sitting at a table in the back. With him were two other men and one woman, obviously closer to Samir and Joanna's age than his own. When he saw the couple, Alan stood and spread his arms wide. His mouth moved, but nothing could be heard over the music. He scooted around the table and approached Joanna first. He took her hand and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He said something in her ear and she chuckled in response. He moved to Samir and gave him a hug.

"Hey, Sammy. Welcome to the club!"

Samir rubbed his fingers together. He could smell all sorts of alcohol on Alan's breath.

"Thanks, Alan. Yeah, it's... loud!"

Alan introduced everybody to each other. They were all trying to speak, but no one could hear a thing.

"Let's just dance," Alan shouted. They followed him to the dance floor.

Samir was an awkward dancer. He was too tall and he didn't play any sports growing up, so coordination was never something he had to worry about. So he stood, in the dense crowd of drunken movers, Joanna dancing in front of him, looking him up and down and pressuring him to put more energy into it with just her eyes. She leaned in.

"He's a real charmer," she said. "I think he said something really sweet about you. Couldn't hear much."

"I hope so," said Samir.

The couple danced for almost an hour. And then they were exhausted. They went back to the table to rest. Alan was as fresh as he had been at the beginning of the night, moving through the crowd, synching up with a random dancer for a few minutes, and then moving on to the next

one. When he saw them leave the dancefloor, he excused himself from his current partner. Samir and Joanna were passing a drink back and forth when Alan approached.

“Hey, what’s up?” he shouted.

“Nothing,” said Joanna. “We just needed a break.”

“Ah, you’re sick of it, huh? Is she sick of it, Sammy?”

Samir was barely paying attention. Joanna interrupted his attempt to respond.

“No, it’s great, we love it here, it’s just—”

“Ah, no, it’s fine. You wanna go? Let’s go. I know where we can go.”

As usual, it was no use arguing with Alan. He spotted his party in the crowd and signaled to each one that they were heading out. The group ended up at a diner four blocks away. The only other occupied table was a two top with one old man on either side. They were playing checkers and eating identical reuben sandwiches. When Alan and company walked in, the owner greeted him as an old friend. They sat at a booth in the back and ordered beer and every appetizer on the menu.

“So, Joanna, what do you do?” said Alan. He was slurring, but he maintained an even demeanor.

“I’m a— an event planner, mostly. Like, you know, parties, fundraisers, political events, that kind of stuff.”

“Oh, I know plenty of people who do that kind of stuff. Do you know Bink Mayhew?”

“Is that a real name?”

Alan didn’t laugh.

“Yeah, he used to throw the best parties. I’ll connect you, I’m sure he could help you out.”

“Help me out? I don’t need help.”

“Yeah, I mean... okay, yeah. Well, you should still meet him.”

Samir was drunk. He was putting all of his focus on remembering. Noting as much as he could about every moment. The seats in their booth were red. The ceiling was a dark brown wood. Alan was wearing a Rolex watch with a blue face. Joanna turned to the woman on Alan’s left.

“So, how do you know Alan?”

“Oh, I just met him tonight,” said the woman.

“Yeah, same here,” said the man beside her.

Samir perked up. Joanna gestured to the other man.

“What about you?” she said.

“Oh, we see each other around occasionally.” The man grinned. “But, tonight, he caught my interest.”

“Oh, really, why is that?”

The man laughed and shrugged.

“You ask a lot of questions,” said the woman.

Joanna sunk into her seat a bit.

“What can I say, my fiancée is a journalist.”

Two servers approached the table with large trays.

“Alright, enough questions,” said Alan, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s eat.”

Joanna didn’t ask anything more. Samir didn’t either. They gave cheerful smiles and nods and interjected occasionally as Alan commanded the attention of the table with drunken stories of scandalous action. Some of them, Samir had already heard. Others, he doubted were entirely

true. They didn't eat much and when the bill came, Alan suggested they all split it evenly. Joanna ordered a car for herself and Samir. On the sidewalk, Alan gave them each a hug. One of the men bid everyone a good evening and left on his own. Alan walked away with the other man and the woman, in whose ears he'd been whispering all night. Joanna and Samir watched them leave. A car pulled up and they slid into the backseat.

"That was interesting," said Joanna.

"Hey, you're the one who insisted we go out."

"You didn't enjoy that?"

Samir thought for a second.

"Yeah, I did."

"Exactly." Joanna paused. "Do you like Alan?"

The question caught Samir off-guard. He spoke slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, just cause you're working with him doesn't mean you like him. Hell, you haven't liked most of the people you work with."

"I do. I don't know. I think I do. Yeah, I do. He's so fascinating. And he's, like you said, he's much nicer than I expected. But also..."

"Yeah, I was surprised, Sammy. Honestly. I kept expecting him to say something sexist or, like, you know, bad. But he didn't. So I'll take that as a good sign."

"He has his moments," said Samir. "I just don't really know... how close he's actually letting me get. Like, that shit that happened earlier with his old friend, I dunno. And this Al Rio situation, he hasn't even been able to talk about what happened."

The driver whipped his head around.

“Al Rio? Y’all talking about Alonzo Rio? Dude really fell off, huh?”

Samir scrambled to speak, but again, Joanna beat him to it.

“Will you not listen to our fucking conversation, dude? What the fuck?”

The driver threw his hands up in a half-apologetic manner. Samir looked at Joanna and smiled. She smiled back. They kissed. At home, they kissed some more. Joanna fell back onto the bed and Samir fell on top of her. They laughed.

“God, I’m drunk,” said Joanna.

“Me too,” said Samir.

They kissed. Samir was taking off his pants when he felt the phone vibrate in his pocket. It was Alan. He looked from his phone to Joanna beneath him.

“Shit, I’m sorry, babe,” he said. He turned the phone to her. “Just give me one second.”

Joanna let out a hyperbolic sigh.

“It’s fine, I get it,” she said.

Samir answered. With the phone between his ear and shoulder, he buttoned his pants back up.

“Hey, Alan, hi, what’s up?” he said.

On the other end of the line, he heard loud breathing.

“Sammy, hi.”

It was Alan. He was out of breath and still slurring.

“I just wanted to tell you that I had a good time tonight. Real good lookin’ woman you got there, she’s great. A bit pushy, but sweet. Listen, that’s not why I’m calling, though. I need—I’m ready, I need to tell you about Alonzo,” he said. “Before I get too sober.”

Samir’s eyes widened. He ran to his bag hanging on the door.

“Oh, okay, can I— Can I record this?”

“Yeah, whatever, I just...” Alan sniffled. “I just need to go, now, before I lose it. Sorry, I know this is a weird way to do this.”

“Yeah, yeah, no, I’m here, Alan. It’s all good. Go ahead.”

Samir switched on the recorder and held it up to the phone. Alan, still panting, swallowed hard and began to talk slowly in a hushed tone.

“Okay, so, when I first met Alonzo Rio, we bonded because we had a lot of sil— similar interests. Two guys from very different backgrounds, it was exciting to find we had so much in common. Even before I started working with him officially, we had a great rapport. So by the time we get to the incident, I’ve been friends with this guy for, like, six years. We’ve come up together. I mean, kind of, he definitely had further to come up from than me. But we were like *this*—you can’t see that—like, ins— ins— inseparable. The problem, Sammy, with being inseparable from your client, is that you come to value their opinions too much.

“On this particular night, we had a gig at the staples center in LA. Now, below the Staples Center is a secret tunnel which circles the stadium and lets out into the Nokia Theater at the LA Live complex. It’s not much of a secret anymore. The concrete floors are always spotless. The air down there is dry and musty. By that time, I’d walked every crook and curve of those hallowed halls countless times.” Alan let out a loud sigh and a quiet burp. “So there’s this girl, one of a few girlfriends he had in LA. There was a lot of... turmoil there. She was code red, man, and I know it’s a shitty thing to say, but she was off her rocker, man. I mean, yeah, he fucked with her, but boy did she fuck back. Ina was her name. She was—” There was mumbling on Alan’s side of the phone. “No, not now, fuck off,” he hissed. “Sorry, where was I?”

“Ina, the girl,” said Samir.

“Oh, right. She was *persona granata*— per— per— *persona non grata* at the Staples center that night, I tell you. But, here’s the thing about the crazy girls. Alonzo would always come running back to them. That night, during the show, Alonzo goes out in the crowd for this bit that he does during his song ‘Pressure.’ Man, they love that shit. But that night, Ina was right up front. And of course, he recognized her instantly. Now, sometimes, when you work security, people hire you to protect them from themselves. And it’s your job to do just that. Alonzo had a girlfriend at the time, real nice girl, and he was already on thin ice with her. When the song was over, Alonzo came to the side of the stage and asked me to bring Ina back. I said no and he gave me his evil stare and I still said no. He told me I had to and then jumped into the next song.” Alan was beginning to sound more sober. “When the next song was over and I hadn’t done anything, he came over and got right up in my face. He said I work for him and I need to do what he says. It hurt, because our relationship was much more than that. But he was being deliberately antagonistic. He would do that sometimes. I still didn’t do anything. So then he comes back one more time and he puts his hand on my shoulder and he says, ‘Alan, please. Please.’ And I just couldn’t say no to my friend in that moment. I could see how bad he wanted it. And I couldn’t deny him that. I went and got her and brought her backstage. I didn’t talk to her. I’d already had plenty of conversations with the fucking psycho. Just showed her where to wait. Not gonna lie, I’d had a couple drinks.

“After the show, Alonzo comes off the stage all hot. We’re hyping him up, me and his whole crew. And he gives me this secretive nod, making sure everything’s good backstage. I give him the nod back. He tells his friends he’ll be back. I take him and this woman down through the tunnels to a room far from all the afterparty commotion. I stood outside and tried not to focus on what I could hear through the door. But, as is human nature, I couldn’t help but listen in. And he

should be glad I did. When I heard that click, my blood ran cold. I heard the gun before it even went off. I don't know how she got it in there. Into the venue. But how she got it past me... it was all my fault. She shot him in the back. Didn't kill him. But he was paralyzed from the waist down." Alan was sniffing again. "I was on top of her before she could let off another one. The rest of my team came. It took them forever to find us. The cops came. It was huge, all over the news. They were both in their underwear. Ina was arrested, of course. I was at Alonzo's side. He was crying in pain and I was the one telling him it was all gonna be okay. I went to visit him in the hospital the next day. Brought a nice bottle. He told me to fuck off, asked me how I could let something like that happen. I was crushed, Sammy. Internally, he started telling people that me and Ina were sleeping together and we orchestrated the whole thing to take him out of the equation. Externally, he sued me for negligence. Got almost everything I had. Almost. There must have been some humanity left in him because he asked for under what my net worth was at the time. And he knew exactly what it was. He left me with the business, maybe because he knew I'd be unhireable after the incident anyway, and he left me with enough money to secure a more modest place to live. I had to forfeit the company over to Hector, and I moved into that dump in Jersey. I tried to reach Alonzo a few times. He'd change his number and I'd get it again from a mutual friend. It was similar to heartbreak, what I felt when he cut me off. And I still haven't heard from him since. We were so fucking close. Like- like brothers. And then he just turns on me after one mistake. Yeah, it's a big mistake, but the way he lied about me... Heartbreaking, Sammy." Alan inhaled deeply and grunted. "Anyway, no questions. You finally got your big story. I don't want to talk anymore."

"But—"

“No, no, I got company, I just needed to get that off my chest. You can ask your questions some other time. Goodnight, Sammy.”

There was silence for a moment. Samir was confused.

“Hey, listen,” Alan continued. “You still there?”

“Yeah,” said Samir.

“Listen, I’m going upstate to my brother’s house for the weekend. Next Friday. You should come with me, meet the family, see that side of my life.”

“Oh, yeah, okay, I should be able to do that.”

“Good, good. Well, goodnight. I’ll be in touch.”

The phone went silent. Samir slowly lowered the recorder. He clicked it off.

“Holy shit,” he said to himself. He turned around to find Joanna had passed out. He kissed his teeth. “Fuck.”

He took off her dress and wrapped the comforter around her.

“Sorry,” he whispered in her ear.

And then he took out his laptop and wrote until his eyes were vibrating.

* * *

Monday, Samir flew to Los Angeles to meet with some producers who were looking to develop one of his articles into a film. When the offer came up, he jumped on it. He didn’t care much about the meeting, but he did care about getting out to LA. When his agent called to congratulate him, he brushed it off and insisted he set up a meeting with Alonzo Rio. Samir pushed his flight back a day and paid for the extra night at the hotel himself. Tuesday night he

received a call from Alan at what must have been long after midnight on the East Coast. They spoke for about an hour. On Wednesday morning, the car pulled up to a gated house in the Hollywood Hills. Samir thanked his driver and stepped out. He pressed a button on the keypad. There was a woman's voice on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Hi, yes, this is Samir Stevens to see Mr. Rio. I know I'm a bit early.”

The gate buzzed and swung open. The California sun was blazing hot. Samir walked down a long cobblestone driveway lined with thick trees. Outside of the spanish-style mansion were an orange Lamborghini and a green Jeep. Samir rang the doorbell. A man in a suit answered and welcomed him inside. He walked into an open foyer with high ceilings and a stairwell on either side leading up to a balcony which split off to hallways in both directions. The walls were adorned with paintings of all sizes and different styles, with mismatched frames. He was escorted to the living room, which sunk down a few steps and had been retrofitted with ramps on either side. He was told to sit on a white couch and wait.

The house was quiet. Samir could hear the tone of a woman's voice speaking somewhere above him. Outside, the sprinklers were watering the sprawling grass yard. One of the sliding glass doors was open and the breeze was filling the house with warm air. There were gold and platinum plaques on the walls around the TV.

Samir heard the whirring of a machine, a ding, heavy doors sliding open in the wall behind him. He twisted around to see an almost cinematic silhouette. A man, seated in a wheelchair, bent posture, wearing a black and gold set of silk pajamas with a flower print. The light of the elevator shone from directly above, casting a shadow over the bottom half of his face. On the top half, his bald head was decorated with symmetrically placed tattoos—a snake

wrapped around the top, an angel in the middle, the faces of Muhammad Ali and Marilyn Monroe, the name *Monica* above his left eyebrow and *Miranda* above his right. As he rolled out of the elevator, a bushy beard emerged into the sunlight. Alonzo Rio. Samir stood up. He walked over to the man and extended a hand.

“Hi, Mr. Rio, I’m Samir. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi, Samir. Nice to meet you, too.” He spoke with a tired, gravelly, but surprisingly warm cadence. “And call me Alonzo if you don’t mind. Mr. Rio is what my lawyers call me. And trust me, you don’t want me to treat you like one of my lawyers.”

They both laughed.

“Okay, Alonzo it is,” said Samir. “Well, thanks for having me.”

“No problem. Let’s go over there.”

They started for the open back door.

“I, uh, I didn’t notice the elevator over there,” said Samir.

“Yeah, I try to keep it discreet. You know, I used to make fun of people who used the elevator in buildings with less than three floors. I got one friend, actually, he should be through later, big motherfucker, maybe you’ll see. He lost twenty pounds on tour with me. Now, the only reason he takes the stairs is ‘cause he doesn’t fit in the elevator with me.”

Samir took a seat at a white metal table. He fished the recorder out of his bag.

“No, no, let’s not do that,” said Alonzo.

“Sorry, force of habit.” Samir put it away. “So, Mr. Alonzo, I’m assuming you know why I’m here?”

“Yeah, you’re working with Alan Brown. Writing this little puff piece of his. You know he’s been trying to get this thing made for a few years. I’m surprised he finally found someone to help him spew his bullshit.”

“With all due respect, I’m here because I want to ask you some questions, not to trash talk my friend– my subject.”

“Oh, your *friend*.” He chuckled. “Give it time, Samir. Tell me, what was it you flew across the country to ask me?” His demeanor shifted abruptly. The smile left his face. He leaned forward. “Talking about Alan doesn’t put me in a very good mood.”

Samir became tense.

“Well, I’ve heard Alan’s side of the story. About your relationship. About what happened at the Staples Center. And I know this is unorthodox, and probably unprofessional, but I’m a journalist before anything else, and I couldn’t miss the opportunity to hear your side.”

“Haven’t you read the articles? Or watched the testimony?”

“Of course, but I know even if you were telling the truth, you weren’t telling the whole truth. You couldn’t have been. Not on camera. That’s just not how those things work.”

“So, I tell it to you again and you do what? You gonna change the book? Take Alan’s story but add a little extra truth to the one part he *needs* you to lie about?”

“I don’t know yet. It’ll depend on what I hear from you today. The thing is, Alan has been a kind, pleasant, generous, and seemingly honest person to work with. I’ve only known him for a few weeks, but he seems like he really cares. So, if either of you are lying, I figure there’s gotta be a good reason.”

“That’s how he gets you. Wait ‘till you’ve known him for a few years,” said Alonzo. “I have to ask. Does Alan know you’re here?”

“No, he doesn’t. And I hope he won’t have to.”

“Well, don’t worry, he won’t hear it from me. I’d rather get shot in the back again than talk to that son of a bitch.” The assurance was a relief for Samir, but the blatant, bitter contempt raised other concerns. “Anyway,” Alonzo continued. “I’m happy to be your fact-checker. You seem like a good kid, I don’t want you getting too wrapped up in Alan’s bullshit. He’s a charming motherfucker, he’ll rope you in so deep and you won’t even notice.”

“I’ve dealt with some pretty dangerous people. I think I can handle Alan Brown.”

“Just giving you fair warning, kid. So, where do you want me to start?”

“Well, tell me a bit about your relationship. And then, tell me what happened.”

Alonzo looked up into the sun and squinted. He wiped his face of the condensing sweat.

“Right, so, I met Alan just as my career started to pick up,” he said. “I must have been in my early twenties. I think we were at a house party. They were celebrating an album release and I’m young and eager so I’m talking to as many people as I can. And I come upon this guy who’s maybe ten, fifteen years older than me. Real handsome, buff dude. He had a whole crowd of women around him, so naturally, I was intrigued. We started talking and it turned out we had a lot in common. Most importantly, we both liked to do a lot of coke. And Alan had a lot of coke. It was fun for a while. He became one of the homies. He’d come out to a show, he’d bring the drugs. He’d tell us crazy stories, mostly about fucking pornstars on private planes or fighting mobsters in a swamp in Tennessee. After all this time, I still don’t know how much he made up. I asked around and there were a few people who could confirm every story. No way it’s all true though. What is true is that he damn near ruined that actress’s life. Definitely ruined her career.”

Samir sat up straight.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, he didn’t tell you? Of course he didn’t tell you. He told you about Lola, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Lola was married to a big producer in the industry. He hired Alan for two reasons. First, to protect her from this psycho stalker. Second, to keep an eye on her because she kept fucking other people. So, of course, she started fucking him. Now, good for her, the husband was a piece of shit. But that was exactly what Alan was hired to prevent her from doing. Big man was onto them immediately. He was suspicious from the jump because Alan was, you know, a handsome young man and all. Alan is one of the worst addicts I’ve ever met. And what that means is he gets addicted to people, too. At a certain point, it was too much, even for her, so she confessed everything. Her husband got together some of his goons and confronted Alan about it. Beat him around a little bit. Now, what they didn’t know was that because of his connection with Ernesto— He told you about Ernesto, right?” Samir nodded. “Well, because he was close with Ernesto, he was protected.”

“Protected? Like mob protected?”

“Yup.”

“By Ernesto?”

“Yeah— Well, no. I mean, sorta. It was more Ernesto’s cousin, Moses. Moses Chancellor.”

Samir felt the heat beating down on the back of his head. It was almost too much to bear. He wanted to get up and dive into the pool.

“Alan Brown was working under the protection of Moses Chancellor?” said Samir.

“Oh, you’re familiar?”

“Of course, man, I’m from New York. You can’t do what I do and not know who Moses fucking Chancellor is.”

“Well, your good friend Alan Brown basically worked for him for the majority of his career. How do you think he was able to get enough money to start his own company? When Ernesto died, he didn’t have much of a company left. Alan had a good deal of money, but he didn’t have enough. You know, he’s an addict. And addictions can cost you. So, Moses was there to fill in all the blanks.”

Samir was trying to contain his anxiety. His leg was bouncing vigorously up and down.

“Are they still connected?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I made sure he had enough money to pay off any outstanding debts after I sued him over the whole Staples Center situation. I hate the fucking guy, but I don’t want him dead.” He paused, resting a hand over his mouth. He was staring at nothing on the table.

“Anyway, Producer Man had his guys beat on Alan a little too hard. Within a few days, he and his wife moved out of the city. Out of Moses’ territory. I’d bet you good money he treated her like shit after that, if he wasn’t already. After all, the whole thing ruined his career, too. And I gotta hand it to Alan, next time he saw that motherfucker, he set him straight. I was lucky enough to see it firsthand.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Alan and I were much closer than he’ll ever let you know. Frankly, than I’ll ever let you know, too. All I’ll say is, I should probably be the one writing this fucking book, instead of— how old are you, Samir?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Twenty-six? Huh, that’s about how old I was when Alan and I really started hanging out. But, speaking of Alan— Where was I... Oh, right, so we were hanging out a lot, having fun. He taught me so much in those first few years. He taught me how to pick up chicks, he taught me

how to fight better, he taught me to be more involved in the business side of my career. He wasn't around all the time, but when he was, it was nice. After a few years, I started to get bigger. I started actually needing personal protection. So, naturally, I hire the guy I'm friends with. That's the lesson right there, Samir. Never hire your friends. The truth is, I knew he was an addict. But there were so many benefits that came along with it. And he was good at his job. Don't get me wrong, he was a great bodyguard. He could read people better than anyone else. He could get info that no one else could. He was big and strong and super fucking smart. But he has this way of burrowing in. Once he likes you, he becomes obsessed. And at a certain point, it was too much. And I told him. He was getting older. He was drinking and fucking more than I'd ever seen before. And it was starting to make him sloppy. It didn't help that Sophie left him that same year. So I told him, as lovingly as I could, that he should fall back a bit. This was still a professional relationship at the end of the day. Even though we were cool, I was paying him for a service. And we had just gotten too close. He'd gotten too comfortable. Now, he didn't like that. But he was chill about it, more chill than I expected. We agreed that he'd finish out the tour and then, you know, we'd take a break. But he became cold and distant. He didn't come out with us longer than he had to. He started delegating certain jobs to other people who worked under him. I'd catch him staring at me and he'd look away. Then we get to the Staples Center. It was a month after our talk, second to last show on the tour." Alonzo took a deep breath. "Now, I gotta backtrack a little bit. See, when you're a star of my caliber, a lot of people wanna sleep with you. And one of the perks of being in that position is, well, I got a lot to choose from. And there was a girl, she was a big fan of mine, her name was Ina. She was super hot, I mean, you've seen the mugshot. But I quickly came to realize that she was also obsessed with me in an- an unhealthy way. She loved me. She wasn't in love with me, but she loved who I was. What I meant to her.

Now, I knew it wouldn't end well from the jump, but she had her ways. And, of course, there's a thrill to someone seeing you as a literal god. So she'd come to my shows sometimes, or I'd DM her when I was in her city, and we'd hang out. She wasn't the only one, but she knew that. The thing about her, though, was that she became friends with Alan, too. Good friends. She was as wild as him. They matched each others' fly perfectly. I always assumed they started hooking up at some point. I was never able to confirm it, but Alan was good at keeping secrets. Around the time I had my talk with Alan, I was trying to clean up my life altogether. I was trying to drink less, do less drugs, focus on starting a family with my girl. She'd dealt with a lot of my shit and it was time I showed her the respect she deserved. I was also an addict, Samir. It's almost impossible not to be on that level. But, I was trying. I blocked Ina on Instagram and I told Alan not to let her anywhere near me. She got my phone number and I blocked that, too. There was one night that Alan let her into my area at the club and I fucking went off on him. He said he just forgot, but he doesn't forget things. Ever. I couldn't block her from coming to the show. I should have, but at the time it didn't feel right. I had this bit in my show where I would go out into the crowd during one of my songs. Protocol is I have to have security with me, so Alan would always follow me out into the crowd with a couple other guys. I saw Ina that night in the crowd. I could never miss her. I ignored her completely, but apparently in all the ruckus, she slipped a note to Alan. When we got back to the stage, he showed it to me. It said, 'one more night?' Just that. Nothing else. I wasn't thinking straight, man. You know, performing can make you high like that. I was so pumped, my adrenaline was skyrocketing. This was the biggest show of my life. I asked Alan what he thought and he just gave me a shrug. I thought, fuck it, right? One last time couldn't hurt. It would be good to get some kind of closure, for both of us. So I told Alan to go

get her. I'll admit, I got off on the idea that I was about to have sex with someone he was—probably—pretty close with.

“Show’s over. I fucking killed that shit. Everyone’s surrounding me with love. And Alan walks up—this motherfucker—like a big black hole in the crowd of light around me, with a half-empty bottle in his hand. Just completely given up. Depressing shit, man. He gives me the nod. I tell everyone I’ll be right back. He takes us deep into the tunnels, some random office. He lets us inside and waits behind the door. We’re in there, Ina is telling me how happy she is to see me. We start to get naked and all that. She’s telling me that she just needed to see me one more time. I’m barely paying her any attention. I’m just pumped and I’m ready to get this over with. I turned around for a second to pour us drinks. She got real dramatic all of a sudden, and she said something like, ‘we need you gone, I’m sorry,’ and the next thing I know my ears are ringing and I can’t feel anything below my chest. I hear Alan yelling. At some point he comes over to me and he’s holding me and we’re both just bursting with tears.” Alonzo began to tear up. “But in that moment, it all came together. Who would have had it out for me other than Alan? How could she have gotten a gun this close to me? If my head of security was in on it. I could tell he was starting to resent me. It’s not like he was a particularly violent person. Not around me. But, I’d heard the stories. And who knows, maybe he was in love with Ina or something. I’d seen him fall in love so many times. Even when he was married. I told him to fuck off and we never spoke in person again after that. And, yeah, I sued his ass. He cost me my whole career. I tried doing a show in the wheelchair once. Nobody wants to see that shit. Name one other successful musician who uses a wheelchair.” He paused. “Exactly. I won the suit, easy. Look at me, it’s a fucking tragedy. Guy like me. Like I said, I made sure he had enough left over to pay off his debts, but I wanted to bleed him dry. He tried to reach me a few times, but it just didn’t feel right. I’m sure

he feels bad. But, I don't really care anymore. He hurt me, I hurt him. That's how it goes. My music career is done. Gone completely. Crazy how that can happen. Not like I lost my voice. My girl left me. No chance I can have a kid now. I'm trying to get into film production."

Alonzo's eyes were red. He rubbed his fingers against his forehead. Samir was stunned. Alonzo made a convincing case, but Samir felt that there was still a piece missing.

"Wow," said Samir. "Thank you for sharing that."

"Yeah, well, you oughta know who you're working with, Samir."

"Thank you, Alonzo. I don't know what I'm gonna do just yet, but I won't forget this. I need to tell as close to the truth as I can get. Is there anyone else I could talk to about this?"

Alonzo chuckled.

"Well, I can tell you where Ina is."

Samir took the information. He hadn't yet decided if he would use it. He had a plane to catch, so they didn't talk for much longer. Alonzo was calm. He listened well and he spoke eloquently. He thanked Samir for listening to his story. They parted with no hostility, and a mutual respect for each other's complicated position. Samir left with a signed CD.

On the plane home, he stared at a mental cork board, trying to connect all the dots in his head. He imagined what Alan would do to him if he found out what had just happened. He felt a knot in his chest. Alan was a friend. Or at least he seemed to be. When the plane landed, he was no closer to any solid conclusions.

Joanna picked him up. He told her what he'd heard.

"Do you think, maybe they were, like, lovers?" said Joanna. "Alan and Al Rio? Huh, Al and Al."

"No, don't be ridiculous. They're both fucking ladykillers," said Samir.

Joanna rolled her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “Whatever you say... I just think it would explain a lot. And he did leave with a dude the other night.”

She was right. It would explain a lot. And Alan had been open about his indiscriminate sleeping habits. Samir hadn't seen or felt any indication that that was the case with Alonzo Rio. But, he also hadn't been looking. If his job was simply to tell Alan's story as it was told to him, then it didn't really matter either.

* * *

Samir spent the next day calling friends, trying to find as much information as he could about Alan's history, his associates, his high school transcript, his arrest record, any news about his father, and anything else he could find. He had also received a box from Alan with scans of a few documents. His marriage license, selected pages from his travel journal, and newspaper clippings highlighting his career achievements and his father's arrest in Hawaii.

All his research didn't amount to anything new. He knew that if he wanted any further insight, he'd have to speak to Sophie. He drafted an email to his agent, asking him to try to set up a meeting. He didn't feel like writing anymore. But, he knew, or hoped he knew, that the desire would come back to him soon.

Friday came and Samir had to force himself out of bed. He'd packed a bag the night before. He said goodbye to Joanna, who kissed him and fell right back asleep. They met at Penn Station for the 7:15 AM train. Alan was wearing a suit and his face was cleanly shaven. His left eye and chin were both newly bruised. He smiled wide when he saw Samir, who did the best he

could to smile back. In his mind, there were two possible conclusions. First, Alan was masterfully deceptive and using Samir for some elaborate ruse to eradicate any of his past wrongdoing from his public perception. He was a bad person and he had hired Samir to help clear his conscience. Second, Alan was misunderstood, he was dragged through the dirt by a spiteful old friend, and his career was tossed out the window for a significant, but honest mistake. Samir tried his best to believe the latter. Alan gave him a big hug.

“Hey, Sammy, how was your trip?” he said.

“Good. Boring. The meeting went well, though.”

“Ah, that’s great. So, I guess I’ll know a big movie writer pretty soon, huh? Maybe you’ll turn this book into a movie.”

Samir forced a polite smile.

“What happened to your face?” he said.

“Oh, nothing,” said Alan. “Got a little too into it at the gym the other day. Is it that noticeable?”

“It’s fine,” said Samir.

They boarded the train. Alan offered the window seat to Samir.

“It’s a beautiful view from this side,” he said. “If you’ve never seen it before, you should really take the window.”

Samir didn’t feel like talking. He put his headphones in and put on some classical composition he had spent the last few months trying to convince himself that he liked. Alan ignored it. He always felt like talking. Within fifteen minutes of the train’s departure, the music was off and Alan was telling stories.

“I met an ex-con on a job. He used to be a hitman in Amsterdam. He told me that one time he was hired to kill someone but make it look like an accident. Now, what he did is, he rigged a car’s headlights to be, like, fifty times brighter than they’re supposed to be. He spent three weeks tracking the guy’s actions and found he usually leaves the gym around the same time almost every night. He crosses the same street. Now, the first thing he had to do was cut off the power to the street lights at the intersection. Wait until it’s late. Took him three nights to get lucky enough that a car would be approaching at the right time. So what he does is, he waits for the guy to start crossing the street and then he starts driving down the opposite way of the oncoming car. At the perfect moment, he turns the headlights on and it blinds the other driver, they hit the guy, and he’s already driving away from the scene of the crime before it even happens.”

Samir would just nod and occasionally say, “wow,” or “that’s wild.” It was a fascinating story. Alan’s stories were all fascinating. He kept talking for the duration of the ride. Samir barely had time to focus on the scenery. The vast Hudson River glistening in the light of the sunrise.

“You alright, Sammy?” said Alan.

The question caught Samir off guard. Alan had never seemed to care so much before.

“Yeah, just a lot on my mind.”

“Nothing too serious, I hope. Girl’s alright?”

“Fine, thanks for asking. Like I said, I’m just out of it. Nothing serious.” He tried to change the subject. “So, you haven’t told me much about what your brother does now.”

“Oh, he’s a painter,” said Alan. “He was always gifted, I mentioned that, but by the time he was out of high school, I knew enough people to get him into the art world. He worked at a

gallery in Hawaii for a while and then he came out to the city. His work started to get big, he met his wife, they had a kid, moved upstate, he flew Mia out here to live with him. Now, he just paints all day. They got it good up here. ”

The train pulled into their station and they stepped off. There were only a few others deboarding. A man in a suit with a briefcase, a young couple, a squad of college students, and a mother and father with their sleepy children. The platform sat right on the water. There was a consistent cool wind. Up the stairs, out into the parking lot, there was a gray Volvo SUV waiting right out front. Kimo stepped out of the car. He looked like Alan, but he was taller and slimmer and his skin was darker. He wore glasses and a plaid shirt and his hair was tied up in a ponytail. He ran over to his brother and they embraced.

“What happened to your face, dude?” he said. His voice was higher and had an underlying positivity which Alan’s lacked.

“Just boxing shit. Kimo, this is my friend, Samir. This is who I’ve been telling you about,” said Alan.

It was the first time Samir had considered that Alan was talking about him when they weren’t together. Of course he was, but to hear it out loud forced Samir to actually think about it. What had he been saying? Kimo extended a hand.

“Hi, Samir. Nice to meet you. It sounds like you guys have been having a hell of a time.”

“Hi, so nice to finally meet you, too,” said Samir.

He felt like a child, climbing his lanky body into the backseat of the car. The drive consisted of mostly small talk, catching up and further introductions. They drove down winding roads lined only with trees and mailboxes and dirt driveways. They emerged into rolling hills and open fields spotted with big houses and barns and cows and horses. It took them twenty minutes

to reach Kimo's home. They turned onto a narrow path on a heavily wooded street. The house was white and gray and dark blue, three stories high with an A-frame roof. The driveway split off to another, smaller house a few hundred feet away. Green grass sprawled in all directions for several acres before hitting the tree line. A golden retriever sat on the front porch, tail wagging, tongue out. The front door was already open.

The trio was greeted by Kimo's wife and son. Meeting Alan's family was like watching a movie adaptation of a book Samir had already read. Alan's nephew, Benji, was taller than Samir imagined. He was seven, pudgy, and spoke with a lisp. He was the spitting image of his father. Benji's mother was Helen, a photographer and art teacher at the local college. Kimo and Helen met at a gallery in Manhattan and eloped six months later. Benji was born shortly after.

Samir didn't notice that Alan had a limp until they stepped out of the car. Alan lifted his nephew into the air and he squealed with glee. Kimo made the introductions. Samir was uncle Alan's friend who was helping him write a book. Mia was in the kitchen making breakfast. She was younger than Samir imagined. Her hair was still mostly black, although it could have been a wig. She walked calmly over to Alan and wrapped her arms around him.

"Hey sweetheart," she said. Her voice was soft and even. She put her hand on his face. "What happened?"

"Hi, Mia, nothing serious," said Alan. "This is my ghostwriter, Samir."

She turned to Samir and her face lightened.

"Oh, hello, Samir. It's so nice to meet you. Breakfast will be ready soon. Kimo will take your bags upstairs, I'm sure you're tired."

"Oh, I feel fine, thank you," said Samir. "It smells delicious in here."

He heard the little boy's voice from behind him.

“Want me to show you the house?”

Samir spun around. It wasn't that he didn't like children, he just didn't have much experience. He looked to Alan, who gave him a reassuring nod, and then to Helen.

“That's a great idea, honey,” she said.

“Sure,” said Samir.

The kid took his hand and dragged him back to the front of the house.

“So, that was the kitchen we were just in. This is the front room. Mom has a fancy word for it but I just call it the front room. This is the living room. That's Inspector Clouseau, he's kind of old so he doesn't do a lot of normal dog stuff anymore. He used to have a brother but he died. This is the dining room. This is where we eat dinner and lunch. We eat breakfast in the kitchen usually. I made that painting right there. This is the TV room. That's my Xbox, but you can use it if you want. There's the backyard. There's Grandma's house. And way back there is the lake. The laundry room is in there, but you won't be doing laundry so I don't need to show you that. Also, I don't want to show you the garage if that's okay. Let's go upstairs.”

Samir followed Benji up the stairs to the second floor. The walls were decorated with three six foot-long framed photographs. One of Helen and Benji, one of Mia, one of Alan and Kimo.

“This is the studio right over here. I'm usually not supposed to go in there but they let me when I'm giving house tours. It used to be two rooms, but we made it one big one instead so Mom and Dad can do their work together. That's their bedroom right there. This is the room you and uncle Alan will be sleeping in.”

“What?” said Samir. He wondered if the boy was confused.

“Yeah, this room is where you guys will stay. It's nice, isn't it?”

There was an air mattress blown up beside the queen sized bed. Alan had failed to mention that they would be sharing a room. Benji continued.

“And then up these stairs is my room, but no adults are allowed up there except for my parents and Inspector Clouseau.”

Helen called out that breakfast was ready.

“Oh, shoot,” said Benji. He bolted down the stairs.

They sat in the dining room. The kitchen table was too small to fit so many people. Breakfast was eggs and toast and pancakes and bacon and sausage and cereal and fruit. Samir assumed it was a feast for the occasion, but when he made a remark about it, he was told this was how they ate every weekend.

There was more catching up. Alan didn't have much to report. According to him, everything was steady. No love interest, no drama, no new business endeavors. Nothing exciting other than the book. Samir was witnessing a new Alan. One he had never seen before. This Alan was loving and joyful. He was at ease. His guard was down, his instincts were subdued. He was fully in the moment. It allowed Samir to let his guard down, too.

When breakfast was over, all the boys went down to the lake with Helen. Other docks along the shoreline held much fancier boats than Kimo's. They spent an hour out on the water. Benji had a child-size fishing rod which kept him occupied while the adults talked. He would drop the line in the water and wait and pull it out and complain when there was nothing on the plastic hook. Kimo was serving as tour guide, telling Samir who lived in which house and why the lake was where it was and what had historically been found at the bottom. It was nothing spectacular, but it was also nothing Samir had experienced before. He had no siblings. His mother was born in Cairo and met his father, a location scout for film productions, when he was

passing through on a business trip. He was ten years her senior and already married. She followed him back to London and he left his wife to be with her. They had Samir when she was forty and he was fifty-one. He grew up in a small London apartment with parents who became too old for fun too quickly. At ten, he went to boarding school in California. It was there that he mostly lost his British accent and discovered his passion for journalism. When Samir was thirteen, his father left his mother to marry another, younger woman. The cost of the divorce resulted in them being unable to pay for Samir's schooling, so he was brought back to London, where he attended the nearby public school. He became reclusive, spending most of his time reading books or writing articles about the things he saw outside his window. He would take long walks and try to identify details about his surroundings most others wouldn't notice. He had two close friends, Ron and Tommy. He wasn't unfriendly or unsociable, he just preferred to keep a small circle. When he was seventeen, he was at a house party with his girlfriend, Lily. They had taken shrooms and he reacted poorly, becoming very ill. Lily convinced another boy at the party to take them back to Samir's apartment. She loaded him into the car and, still high and oblivious, slammed the car door on his finger, severing it completely. They broke up a week later. Not because he resented her for it, but because she couldn't bear the guilt of what she had done and his bandaged hand served as a constant reminder. The breakup, his first, hurt more than the injury. But he quickly came to realize that a missing pinky had its perks. He gained sympathy and attention from people who previously didn't know he existed. His teachers lightened his workload during the time of his recovery. Girls pitied him, but in a way that benefited a seventeen-year-old boy. He was accepted into college in New York City and majored in journalism. His first newspaper job was so impressed by the portfolio he had generated that they hired him full-time straight out of school. Within a year he was poached by a much more

prestigious paper. By twenty-four, he was traveling to hostile territories to interview revolutionaries and drug lords and terrorist leaders. And he found that a missing finger almost always put his subjects at ease. There was an implication of experience, of trauma, of resilience. They were inclined to treat him as someone who had shared a similar experience in some way or another, even if it was untrue. He had, since he was young, a quality which allowed people to open up to him, to trust him. At twenty-six, he was two hours north of Manhattan, spending quality time with the family of his most dishonest subject. It was his first family vacation ever. And he would try to enjoy it, despite his concerns.

Mia had to go to the local church to help set up for an event the following evening. The rest of the family, and Samir, went into town for lunch. They took two cars because Alan wanted to drive the two-seat Corvette Kimo bought as a thirty-fifth birthday present to himself. It was more of a street than a town. Two blocks of independently run cafes and antique shops and attempts at ethnic eateries. They chose a small deli, one the Makani family had been to hundreds of times. They took their sandwiches to the park. Benji and Samir were becoming fast friends. His natural instincts guided him in his attempts to entertain the kid. And for the first time in his life, he liked the idea of having one of his own. They all sat around a table. Alan leaned into his brother's ear and spoke softly.

“Can we talk for a second?” he said.

Kimo nodded. They stood up.

“We'll be right back,” said Kimo.

“Can I come?” said Benji.

Alan put his hand on Benji's shoulder.

“Sorry, Benji, this is grown-up talk,” he said. The boy frowned. The brothers walked off into the park. Helen wrapped an arm around her son and put her phone in front of him. He grabbed it and became transfixed. Helen turned to Samir.

“Hey, is Alan alright? Kimo’s been kind of worried.”

Over her shoulder, Samir could see them talking. Alan’s posture was slouched. His hands were together in a pleading manner. Kimo was standing firm, almost condescending.

“Yeah, he seems... fine,” said Samir. “But, you know, I only know what he tells me.”

“Right, but, you’re not, like, picking up on anything? Anything we should be concerned about?”

Samir wondered what had sparked this concern.

“Listen, if it was something life-threatening, I would be obligated to tell someone. But as Alan’s ghostwriter, I don’t think I’m morally in a place where I could divulge information he doesn’t want you to know. But between us, he seems pretty much the same as I’d imagine he’s been for the past couple years.”

“Don’t talk about Uncle Alan behind his back,” said Benji, without looking up from the phone. “Grandma told me that you don’t talk about people behind their back because you can’t see the story their face tells.”

Helen looked down at her son.

“That’s real smart, bud.”

She focused back on Samir. Behind her, Kimo was pressing his fingers into his temples, waving his other hand violently. Alan was arguing back.

“So, Samir, I see a ring. You’re married?” said Helen.

“Engaged,” he said.

“Oh, how sweet. When’s the wedding?”

Samir was only half-focusing on the conversation. Alan and Kimo had calmed down and now seemed to be speaking more rationally.

“Um, I– I’m not exactly sure yet. Joanna– my girlfriend, she’s an event planner so she’s very particular about everything. I’m just letting her handle it.”

“Mmm, sounds like a solid girl.”

“Yeah, she’s great.”

“You know, Alan really helped us a lot for our wedding. He didn’t just pay for stuff, he got us a date at this beautiful orchard not far from here. There was, like, a two year waitlist, but you know Alan and his strings. He loves to pull ‘em.”

The men were walking back over, Kimo a few feet ahead of Alan. As he came closer, Samir could see his face was reddened. Alan looked sad.

“Yeah,” said Samir. He had already forgotten what she said.

Kimo came up from behind her and leaned in.

“Hey, hon, me and Alan have to go do something real quick. Meet you back at the house?”

Helen was clearly confused.

“Oh, sure,” she said.

Samir looked over to Alan.

“Should I–”

“Sorry, Sammy,” Alan said, shaking his head. “Brother stuff. I’ll catch you up later. Have fun with my little Benji.”

Benji looked up.

“You’re leaving?” he said.

“Just for a minute, buddy,” said Kimo. He gritted his teeth. “Uncle Alan needs some help with something important.”

They left. Samir sat at the table, unsure what to say or do.

“Was that... normal?” he said.

“Oh, they’re always getting up to stuff,” said Helen.

“How often does he come up here?”

“It varies. Used to be almost every weekend. Now, maybe once every month or two. We haven’t seen him in a while. But he FaceTimes every couple days. He cares about his family, that’s for sure. ”

“Did he... come up here after the incident?”

Helen turned pale. She looked down at her lap.

“I don’t think he’d want me telling you things he doesn’t want you to know, either.” She grabbed the phone from Benji and stood up. “Alright, let’s show Samir around some more, huh?”

Benji jumped with excitement. They left the park and spent some time shopping. Samir bought a necklace for Joanna and a few rings for himself. They drove down to the Hudson River and walked along the shoreline. They didn’t talk about Alan anymore. Samir learned more about their life upstate. He learned about Benji’s friends at school and his favorite games. On their way home, they picked up Mia from the grocery store down the street from the church. She was planning a real feast for their special guests.

Alan and Kimo were still out when the rest of the family arrived home around 1. They unloaded the groceries. Inspector Clouseau was waiting by the door. For a family that had supposedly been through so much, Alan’s was startlingly welcoming.

In the kitchen, Mia explained that it was a family tradition for everyone to participate in the preparation of the meal. She taught Samir how to clean fish. Benji washed vegetables, Helen chopped them. The brothers walked through the front door around 1:45. Alan had a black duffle bag in his hand. He brought it upstairs before joining them in the kitchen. With five pairs of hands, they finished prepping by 3. The soup was on the stove, the fish and chicken were marinating in the fridge, the rice was soaking, the vegetables were chopped and placed aside in a bowl, and the pork was in the slow cooker.

When they were done, Samir called Joanna and then spent some time reading on the air mattress. The black duffle bag sat at the foot of the bed beside him. Alan knocked on the door around 5 and told him it was time to start cooking. Kimo was firing up the grill on the back deck when Samir came down. He was tasked with grabbing the chicken, salmon, and eggplant from the fridge. Alan and Kimo manned the grill together while Samir and Benji played go fish. Samir was never very handy in the kitchen, but he tried his best. In that house, however, it was clear that his skills weren't required beyond making the prep go faster. At 7, they were all seated around the dinner table with mounds of food before them. Mia made them say grace before they dug in.

“Samir, how was your day in our little slice of heaven?” said Mia.

Samir had already taken a bite. He swallowed hard.

“Great, great, it's wonderful up here. And this food looks delicious, too.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart. Yes, I'm blessed to be in such a wonderful place with both my boys. It kind of reminds me of home.”

“It is home,” said Benji.

Everyone let out an endeared laugh.

“So, what do you think of my brother?” said Kimo. “You’ve been spending more time with him than anyone else lately.”

Samir’s anxiety came flooding back. He thought of everything Alonzo Rio had told him and everything he had suspected since they first met. He tried to suppress it with what he wanted to be true, with the fun they’d had. There was no denying that Alan was a friend.

“He’s nice,” said Samir. “He’s very... strong-willed. Inspiring. Resilient. All-around impressive.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Alan.

“Yeah, man. Your discipline blows me away.”

Alan gave him a smile.

“Well, thanks, Sammy, I think I like you, too.”

Samir appreciated it, and it thrilled him, but he also felt the hair raise on his arms. Even in the midst of war, he knew who was right and who was wrong. Even when he interviewed a man who’d been responsible for the murder of hundreds or thousands of innocent civilians, he knew he was there only there because it was his job. He didn’t make friends with such people. It wasn’t possible. Both sides always treated each other with a reasonable amount of contempt. Morally, he always knew where he stood. Not here. Not in the dining room of the Makani residence. He felt so at home. In less than a day, they had welcomed him into the family without hesitation.

“How’s the book coming along?” said Helen.

“It’s good, yeah. I mean, it’s my first book of this kind, so I’m sort of figuring it out as I go. I’ve written a bit here and there, when the inspiration comes. But, I’ve talked to some people

and I think it'll be best for me to wait until we're done to really dig in. But, hey, we're almost done, right?"

"We're pretty much done," said Alan. "Sad thing is, I don't think I wanna be. Food's delicious, Mia."

Everyone agreed.

After dinner, Helen took Benji to bed and Mia went back to her own little house. The brothers were tasked with handling the dishes. Samir was changing upstairs when Alan walked in. He panicked and wrapped a blanket around his half-naked body.

"Oh, sorry," said Alan. He walked in anyway. "Don't mind me, I've spent most of my life around naked men." He held up his hand, revealing two joints. "Wanna smoke?"

Samir continued to change under the blanket. He told Alan he'd meet him outside.

He found Alan and Kimo sitting on the wooden steps of the deck with Inspector Clouseau. The humans were drinking beers. When Alan saw Samir, he seemed to pull a fresh one out of thin air. He offered it to Samir, who didn't like beer, but didn't want to be left out, so he took it. He sat beside Alan and looked up at the sky. There were more stars than he'd seen in his entire life.

"Beautiful, huh," said Alan. He lit the first joint and took a long drag.

"It's like one of those long exposure photos," said Samir.

"That's because there's so little light out here. I feel like you can see more sky in the Hudson Valley than anywhere else in the world," said Kimo.

Alan laughed.

"And you're not even high yet," he said. They got high. And after a long, pensive silence, Alan turned to Samir and said, "What are you thinking about?"

Samir hadn't been high since the night before he proposed to Joanna. He went to a friend's place to help subdue his cold feet and the best solution they could find was to smoke as much as they had.

"There's three decades sitting on this deck right now," he said. "I'm twenty-six, you're thirty-six, and you're forty-seven."

Alan put his arm over Samir's shoulder.

"See, that's why I love you, Sammy. You have that sort of brain that just... notices things."

Samir tried to let the stress come back to him, but he couldn't feel it. He remembered everything, but it simply couldn't penetrate the peace of his mind in that moment. Kimo started cackling.

"Al, what does that even mean?"

"I don't fuckin' know, man. Just, like, you get it, right Sammy?"

"I guess," said Samir.

They all giggled.

"I'm so glad you came up here with me, Sammy," said Alan. He squeezed Samir's arm.

"You get to see a part of me not many people have ever seen."

"It's true," said Kimo. "He hardly ever brought Sophie up here when they were together."

"Hey, now, that's just cause she fucking hated you guys," said Alan. He could barely contain his laughter. None of them could.

"Fuck off," said Kimo. "She loved us. It was you she hated."

The whole world went silent. Samir wasn't sure if this was how they normally spoke or if a line had just been crossed. He thought he could hear something swimming in the lake. He could see the gears turning in Alan's head. Rather than respond, Alan turned to Samir.

"You know how many times I've punched this motherfucker in the face?"

Again, they laughed. Again, Samir let himself relax. When the laughter settled, he remembered what he had thought to ask earlier, but forgotten.

"So, where did you guys go earlier?"

He was worried the question would dampen the mood. And he felt almost immediately that he was right.

"Not tonight," said Alan. "After tomorrow, I promise, I'll be able to tell you everything I haven't already. I just have some business I have to deal with first. For my own peace of mind."

"Okay, well..." He didn't want to say it, but it was already being said. "When you're ready to talk, I'll be there."

Alan smiled.

"What a tender moment," said Kimo. And they laughed again. Samir was silently thanking Kimo for breaking the tension.

"That reminds me, actually," said Alan. "We can't stay the whole weekend like we planned. Have to leave tomorrow. But we can come back up soon."

Kimo said nothing. It was clear that he already knew.

"Let me guess. Can't tell me why?" said Samir.

Alan nodded.

They smoked until they were too high to function and then they went to bed. Samir hadn't had a sleepover since high school, but it felt no different than it did then. They were

giggling in the dark and cracking jokes. Alan mentioned that he needed to be home by 3 PM the following day, so unfortunately they wouldn't have much time in the morning. They fell asleep accidentally, unaware of the time.

When Samir woke up, the sun was shining through the windows. Alan was nowhere to be found, but the duffle bag caught his attention immediately. It had been opened ever so slightly and all he could see through the unzipped hole was cash. Before he could consider it further, Alan entered, wet, completely naked save for a too-small towel wrapped around his waist. Samir averted his eyes.

“Morning. Get dressed,” said Alan. “Train’s in an hour and a half. Breakfast is almost ready.”

He noticed the duffle bag was in Samir’s line of sight and kicked it off to the side. He put a shirt on. Alan was more his usual self again. He was anxious. Samir hurried to get ready and met the family downstairs for one final feast. They thanked him for coming. He thanked them for having him. Kimo told him to come back soon, even without Alan. Helen told him he was welcome to come play with Benji any time. Mia told him she couldn’t wait to read the book about her son. Samir was doing him a great service. He made sure to get everyone’s phone numbers in case he needed to reach them for fact-checking purposes. Benji hugged Alan’s leg as he was walking out the door. They loaded the bags into the car and headed back to the station.

Alan and Samir sat beside each other once again on the train. Alan was noticeably silent this time. He had his own headphones in, fingers interlaced, leg bouncing up and down frantically. Samir could hear scratchy electric guitar blasting through the little buds. He was overwhelmed by his own stress. He had to say something. He was having too much fun. He couldn’t allow himself to get any closer. He tapped Alan on the shoulder.

“What’s up?” he said.

“I have to ask you a few questions that can’t really wait any longer, but they might not be ones you want to hear,” said Samir.

Alan shrugged.

“I’m sure it couldn’t be that bad. I’m open, man. What is it?”

“Were you... when it happened, the thing with Alonzo, did you have a sexual relationship with Ina?”

Alan let out an amused snort.

“That’s it? What can I say. The truth is, we were fucking occasionally. But it’s not like we were dating or anything. And I sure as shit didn’t help her bring the gun into that room, I’ll tell you that.”

“Did you...” He almost couldn’t do it. “Did you have a sexual relationship with Alonzo Rio?”

Alan’s face flushed red.

“No, fuck no. Fuck off. What would even make you think something like that?”

“Okay, sorry, I just had to ask.”

“Well, it was a stupid question.”

It was too late to turn back. Samir lowered his voice.

“Do you know Moses Chancellor?”

Alan’s eyes went wide.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Samir? Keep your fucking voice down.” He took a quick glance around the train. “Did my brother tell you something? When did you even have time to talk to him?”

“It wasn’t your brother, Alan.”

“It wasn’t— then who— oh my god. You think I’m a fucking idiot.”

“No.”

“You talked to Alonzo, didn’t you? When you were out in California.”

“I— no, I—”

“You’ve been acting weird since you came back from California. Samir, did you forget it’s literally my fucking *job* to read people? I am a professional in the field of paying attention to the way people act. Don’t think I haven’t noticed, you fucking rat. I was just giving you the benefit of the doubt. I told myself maybe your cat was sick or some shit. Because I like you. And you told me you like me. And you care about me and you care about my story. I told you he ruined my life and you went to *him* to see if I was telling the truth?”

“Alan, I’m sorry, it wasn’t like that.”

“Did he tell you we fucked? He’s full of shit, Samir.”

“He didn’t—”

“And don’t you dare mention Moses Chancellor, you fucking parasitic scumbag, you’re gonna get us both fucking killed.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I know that you can see, plainly, that I don’t have many people in my life that I’m close to. I let you in because I had an instinct that I could trust you. My whole life, I’ve acted based on my instincts and up until a couple years ago, they never let me down. But I was wrong about you, Samir. You fake motherfucker, not even your name is real. If I was me a couple years ago I would throw you through that fucking window right now.”

Samir was shaking.

“Alan, please—”

“Shut the fuck up, Samir. There’s nothing you can tell me. I’ve been fucked with too much. This was a mistake. I mean god damn, you were hugging my nephew this morning, whole time this is what you were thinking? I wanna throw up.”

He paused for a moment.

“Alan—”

“It’s done. I can’t deal with this. We’re done.”

“What do you mean?”

“The book, dumbfuck. The book. Are you listening to me? It’s over. You broke my trust. I don’t want you telling my story anymore.”

“But, we—”

“You crossed me when I was nothing but nice to you. I don’t know why that’s become a trend lately, but I’m sick of it. And to bring it up right after I let you into my family. You’re a twisted kid. You know, I never asked you how you lost your finger, ‘cause, you know, courtesy, but I bet whoever did it was giving you what you fucking deserved. You have no idea what I’m going through right now, but you just made it infinitely worse.”

Samir was numb. He let the words fall out of his mouth without thinking.

“Well, maybe if you told me what you were going through...”

Alan stared with utter disgust. His eyes were red.

“Burn whatever you’ve written. Smash that fucking recorder. And send me back my shit. We’re done.”

Samir couldn’t say anything more. He was terrified. But, he was also just barely relieved. Alan stood up. He grabbed his suitcase and the duffle bag and moved to another train car. Samir was on the brink of tears.

When the train reached Penn Station, Samir ran off as quickly as he could. He searched the crowd for Alan, but couldn't find him. He went home. Joanna was standing in the kitchen with a cup of tea when he walked in. She greeted him with a loving smile and asked how the trip was. He dropped his bags and laid down on the wooden floor. He made no sound, but tears were flowing out of his eyes. Joanna sat beside him and waited until he was ready to tell her what happened.

* * *

Samir was depressed. Monday, he started drinking the moment he woke up. He let loose a slight smile at the cruel thought that he was becoming more like Alan. He didn't touch his writing, or his recorder, or Alan's box of documents. He figured he would wait until he was asked to return them. He slept for three hours over the course of the next three days. As hard as he tried, he was tormented by the things Alan had said. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong. But if that was true, why did he keep his actions hidden? He was terrified of telling his agent. This was his first project of this size. The publisher gave him an unprecedented amount of freedom for someone who had never written a book before. And he blew it. Joanna was there for him as much as she could be. He told her what had happened. She assured him it was just an overreaction and Alan needed some time, but he'd come back around.

Samir was trapped in an endless loop of alcohol and tears. He thought this must have been exactly how Alan felt when the world unjustly turned against him. He understood the allure of the bottle in his hand. He understood the obsession with exercise, too. The emotional release of beating the shit out of an inanimate object. He began to feel better towards the end of the

week. Kimo called him on Friday. He was on his way down to the city. As he heard the words through the phone, Samir felt his legs buckle. He was sweating and his eyes were watering and he wanted to throw up.

Alan was dead. He was killed in his apartment only hours after they arrived back in Manhattan. His body wasn't found until Thursday. The landlord was scheduled to come perform maintenance on the heater in the kitchen. He walked in to find Alan sitting on the couch. His legs were broken and his throat was slit. When the shock of the news wore off, the despair set in. Amidst the despair, Samir's journalistic instincts took over. He met Kimo at the train station. His first question was why Alan had a duffle bag full of money. Kimo told him that he didn't know what the money was for, just that Alan was in a bind and said he needed seventy thousand dollars by the next morning. Alan had never asked for anything from his brother, so Kimo was inclined to do all he could to help. The most Kimo was able to gather, from various bank accounts and a hidden storage space, was fifty thousand. That was all he knew. Speaking to the police later that day, Samir found out that Hector had been killed a week earlier in an almost identical fashion. He kept thinking about a conversation he'd had with Alan over the phone when he was in LA.

Alan's funeral was held at a church in Brooklyn, down the street from Ducky's. Joanna helped plan the ceremony with Mia and Kimo. Samir was asked to speak. He reminisced about their time together and all he had learned about—and from—Alan. He kept it short and positive. The majority of attendants were members of the boxing club. A few of Alan's co-workers made an appearance. It was there that Samir finally met Sophie and obtained her contact information in the hopes that they could talk at a more appropriate time. Alan's mother attended as well, but she made it clear that she was wholly uninterested in speaking to Samir about the book. There were two private appointments made for later in the day to view the casket. No one was to know, but

as the coordinator, Joanna had to be there to let them in. And despite her protest, Samir hid in the confession booth and watched through the door.

The first private guest was Alonzo Rio. He was accompanied by a single security guard, a man who looked much like Alan must have when he was younger. Alonzo wore a hat and sunglasses and a casual black suit. Joanna and the guard left him alone with Alan. Samir couldn't hear what he was saying, but within a few minutes, Alonzo was sobbing over the casket. He sat there for ten minutes, talking and crying and and praying and holding the limp hand of his former protector. He removed something from his pocket and slipped it into Alan's jacket. And then he left. Before Samir could see what it was, the second guest arrived.

The second guest had put his name down as Jesus Kingsley, but when he walked through the door, Samir recognized him instantly. It was Moses Chancellor, adorned in a red satin suit with black lining. His hair was gray and curly and unkempt, contrasting his sharp attire. He was flanked by six other men of varying height, age, and race. Two of those men were Antonio and Alessandro. Joanna led them to the casket and stood off to the side. Moses gripped the wooden frame with both hands.

"Joanna Dayton-Spall," he said. His voice echoed through the church with a vague, unplaceable accent.

Joanna stood still. Samir moved closer to the door.

"Fiancee to Samir Oglesby, also known as Samir Stevens," he continued.

"Yes," she said. Her voice shook.

"I need to speak with your boyfriend, Joanna. Where is he right now?" She wasn't given a chance to answer. "He's here, isn't he? He wouldn't leave you alone with his friend's dead

body. I've heard about this kid. He's so... eager. Nosy, even." Moses began to yell. "Samir! I'm here with your girlfriend and I don't want to have to do anything dramatic!"

There was no reason to hesitate. Samir burst out of the booth and walked over to Moses.

"What do you want?" he said. "Did you kill my friend?"

Moses let out a hefty laugh.

"Oh, Samir. Can I call you Sammy?" It seemed like everyone was. "Sammy, it's so good to finally meet you. Real clever hiding place there." He paused, allowing Samir to come closer. "I hear you're making a movie." He spoke with unnerving enthusiasm.

"Did you kill my friend?"

"Well, aren't you persistent," Moses said, chuckling. "No, I didn't kill him. I hardly ever do the dirty work myself."

Moses shifted his knowing gaze over to Antonio and Alessandro for just a brief moment. Samir was angry. He was angry at the powerful man who stood joyfully before him, but he was also angry that there was nothing he could do to change any of it.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Your friend Alan owed me a large sum of money. I'm not sure if he mentioned that during your little book talks."

"He didn't. And what difference would it make? He's dead already, you killed him, you got fifty thousand dollars. What else is there?"

Moses wasted no time.

"Twenty thousand more dollars."

Samir and Joanna glanced at each other.

"We should be able to work that out," said Joanna.

“Oh, dear, the boys are talking, if you don’t mind. And maybe you should wait to hear what I have to say next before offering me money that I don’t need or want,” said Moses.

He turned his attention back to Samir.

“Listen, Sammy.” Every time he heard the nickname, he flinched. “I don’t know just yet what Alan saw in you, but I trust his judgment. I could always trust his judgment. And I trust that you’re going to become a very important person very soon.”

“And?”

“And, Sammy, my boy...” He took a few steps closer to Samir. His breath smelled like tuna and cigars. “I want *you*. Do I really have to spell it out? Of course you can give me twenty thousand dollars and be on your way. But, where’s the fun in that? Besides, I already broke even with the fifty. I’d much rather keep *you* in my corner.”

“I don’t want this,” said Samir. “I’m just a writer. Let us pay you and we can move on with our lives. I’ll never tell a soul, neither of us will, right Jo?”

She nodded her head. Moses stretched his arms and let out a sigh.

“Aw, guys, I appreciate it, I really do. I’m just in the market for more unique commodities at the moment,” he said. He moved in even closer to Samir. Moses was several inches shorter, but Samir felt as though he was being towered over. Their faces were almost touching. “You’re not just a writer, Sammy. You’re gonna be a star. And your pot is one I’d very much like to have my hand in.” Moses took out a business card and shoved it into Samir’s jacket pocket. “That’s so you can reach me if you need. Don’t give it to the police. It won’t work. If you don’t need to reach me, I’ll be in touch when I need to reach you. I can see where you’re headed and I wanna be a part of it. And I can help you. I can help you reach heights you’ve never even dreamed of.” He began to walk away.

“You want me to work for you?” said Samir.

Moses stopped dead in his tracks and spun around. He was surprisingly nimble for his old age.

“I want you in my court, Sammy. And I want to be in yours. We have a bright future ahead of us. Lots to discuss!”

The group of men left swiftly, floating out of the cathedral like a black cloud of death and cologne. Joanna began to cry and Samir comforted her, holding back his own tears. He assured her everything would be okay. As much as he tried to resist, tried to feel terror and sadness and remorse, he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of intrigue.

* * *

It took Samir a year and a half to finish the book. Some changes needed to be made, of course. Primarily, a different perspective. In the aftermath of Alan's murder, Samir's story became one of the most in-demand in the world. It seemed everyone was interested in what had happened but the police. He received offers from competing publishers, massive sums of money to buy him out of his current contract. He accepted the highest bid without hesitation. When the news broke, he got a scolding call from his agent. *Do you realize how unprofessional that is? How long I've been building this relationship? You're throwing your reputation down the drain and mine with it!* Samir assured him he had no intention of ever publishing another book. And with the money from this deal, he'd never have to write anything again. Only one article about the incident, serving as a sort of obituary, was released by a major publication. It was written by Samir, with the close consultation of Moses Chancellor. There were plenty of tabloid articles and

YouTube conspiracies, however. Samir had to privately explain the true nature of the situation to Kimo, who was justifiably devastated. And furious. But he ultimately had to accept that nothing could really be done.

The story garnered international intrigue, and the buzz for the book only grew. It was optioned for a film six months before release, and Samir was to write the script himself. The week of the book's release, Samir had a press run usually reserved for A-list actors. Press junkets, radio shows, morning and evening talk shows.

His most important appearance was Thursday night, two days after the release, on The Lucille Parris show. Lucille Parris was a stand-up comedian who rose to moderate fame in the late 1990s. After a run of successful films in the early 2000s, she was given her own late-night talk show, broadcast live every Monday through Thursday.

Samir looked at his reflection in the green room mirror backstage. The hair and make-up team had just left. He had been prepped a few hours earlier as to what questions he would be asked and what points he needed to hit. His hair was cut short and styled. His beard was sharply trimmed and shaped. He was wearing a black suit with a black shirt underneath, the top button undone. Behind him, on the couch, sat Moses' lackey, Antonio. Seeing him stare at his iPhone felt anachronistic. His slick hair and mustache and dark purple three-piece suit set him a hundred years before the time in which he currently found himself. Samir hadn't made any public appearance without Antonio's presence in the past year. Samir had no concern for his life or Joanna's. At least, not at the moment. He knew the trajectory he was on would result in a particularly useful connection for Moses to have. So, Antonio served as more of an advisor than an intimidator. Despite his murderous nature, and considering Samir didn't have much of a choice, they developed a friendly rapport.

A PA peaked his head in through the door and told Samir he was on in five minutes.

Samir thanked him and stood up.

“Ready to go, big man?” said Antonio.

“As ready as I’m gonna be,” said Samir. He was shaking his limbs out and bouncing up and down on the tips of his feet.

“You got this, bro,” said Antonio.

Samir laughed.

“Don’t say, ‘bro,’ It sounds weird with your accent.”

“I came to America because here I can say whatever I want.”

“Right, I’m sure that’s why you came here. Have you ever thought about switching up your attire? You look like you sell moonshine in the 1920s.”

“I look proper. How many times are you going to insult my clothing, Samir? You forget how you dressed when I met you?”

“I still dress that way,” said Samir. “Just not around your snobby ass.”

The PA stuck his head in again.

“Three minutes, Mr. Stevens.”

Samir gave a thumbs up. When the PA left, he turned to Antonio and extended his hand.

“May I?”

Antonio reached into his pocket and pulled out a vial of cocaine. Samir unscrewed the cap and tapped out a thin line onto his index finger. He snorted it and wiped his face and hands. He handed the vial back to Antonio and walked over to the mirror to fix himself up.

“I’m quitting once this fucking press tour is over,” said Samir.

“Sure,” said Antonio.

“I’m serious. And you better hold me to it.”

“Of course, Samir. I’m here to serve.”

The PA came in again.

“Mr. Stevens, two minutes, please come with me.”

Samir took a deep breath and straightened out his suit. He spun around and headed for the door. Antonio followed him out, but kept his distance. As he approached the sidestage, Samir was assaulted by make-up artists and hair stylists making their final touches and someone clipping a microphone to his collar. He closed his eyes and let it all happen. He thought about how he wanted to present himself to the world. He had been practicing his charm for some time, and although it came with unbearable guilt, his best reference was Alan.

He heard the countdown on the other side of the curtain. *And we’re back in 5, 4, 3...* He heard applause. He heard Lucille’s commanding voice.

“Welcome back to the show, ladies and gentlemen. My next guest is a young journalist who began his career traveling all around the globe, interviewing some of the most dangerous and elusive figures currently living today. He took a different turn with his new book, a biography of the infamous bodyguard, Alan Brown, which hit stores this week and is already receiving rave reviews. Please help me welcome to the show, Samir Stevens.”

Samir was propelled forward by a hand on his back. He emerged into the room to blinding lights and roaring cheers. He smiled and waved and tried to keep an even stride on his way to the couch. Lucille greeted him with a hug and a handshake and gestured for him to sit. He unbuttoned his jacket. The crowd settled.

“Samir Stevens, thank you so much for being here. Welcome to the show.”

Samir crossed his legs and shifted in his chair. He told himself to relax.

“Thank you for having me, Lucille. I’m a—” He cleared his throat. “I’m a big fan of the show, it’s really an honor to be here.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. Now, how old are you, Samir?”

“I’m twenty-eight.”

“Twenty-eight, wow, and now you’ve already had a successful career as a journalist, written this new book, which is excellent, by the way, and most definitely on track to become a bestseller, and now you’re writing a movie adaptation of the book as well, correct?”

She spoke fast.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“So, this book, everybody’s talking about this book. Tell us a little bit about it for those who don’t know.”

“Right, so I, uh...” Deep breath. How would Alan do it? Sit up straight. “I was working on a job in Belize at the time and it was good timing, because as interesting as the story was, I wanted to get out of there. I got back to my hotel one day and my agent calls me and he’s like, ‘hey, I know you told me you’re not interested in this kind of stuff, but this security guard from New York has been reaching out and he wants you to write his autobiography.’ I’d received a few other requests to do that type of thing in the past, but I told him I wasn’t interested. So, naturally, my first instinct is to just cuss him out...” The crowd laughed. Lucille did, too. “But he told me this one felt different, so I humored him. He tells me it’s this guy named Alan Brown, which sounded vaguely familiar. He tells me a little bit about his situation, so I look him up and his story just spoke to me. He seemed like a fascinating guy, and I believed that he was misunderstood. And honestly, I had just gotten engaged, so I was okay taking a somewhat... safer job.”

The crowd laughed.

“And so you come back to New York and meet with Alan, what did you think of him when you first met?”

“I thought he was scary,” said Samir. The crowd laughed. “But he was kind. I— I could sense a certain darkness in him, you know? He lived alone, he worked this crap job at the bank, and the more he told me about his life, the life he used to live, the more I realized this was a man who needed to tell his story, not just so the world could know the truth, but also because *he* needed to tell it. For his own sanity.”

“And now it’s a really fascinating story. You’ve crafted it in such an intriguing way. I read it over the weekend, it’s truly a wonderful—and tragic—read. He lived a thrilling life.”

“Thank you, yeah, he really did.”

“You know, I met Alan once. I remember it distinctly.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, he tried to take me home.”

The crowd laughed. Samir did, too.

“Yeah, that sounds like Alan,” he said.

“But I understand what you’re saying,” said Lucille. “He was working when I met him and he had a very imposing presence, but he really seemed like a sweetheart. He didn’t have that thing that a lot of those types of guys have, that coldness. He was fun.”

“No, you’re right, he was very passionate, very disciplined, he had his questionable opinions, he had his issues, but he really was a good man,” said Samir.

“You do show that in this book. You also show his dark side. A key theme is the numerous addictions he dealt with, particularly around the time of the famous incident at the

Staples Center, but your book has been decried by certain other authors and critics to be a biased portrayal, given the context of your relationship. What do you say to the people who claim you were too close to Alan to write an honest biography?”

“Well, first of all, I’m not an author, I’m a journalist who wrote a book.” The audience laughed. “And the truth is, I don’t really care what they have to say. I did become close with Alan. Probably too close, but that was also the only way to get him to tell me the things he did. And frankly, I made no attempts to hide the nature of our relationship. There’s no deception here. I just...” Samir felt tears welling in his eyes. “I just wanted to do my friend’s story justice, you know, since he couldn’t do it himself. He should be sitting on this couch with me right now.”

Lucille gave him a moment to correct himself. He could feel the audience being drawn in. The warmth of their invisible gaze through the glaring lights. He could feel them bending to his words. He could tell them whatever he wanted and they would believe him.

“You don’t discuss the circumstances of his death much in the book,” said Lucille. “Now for those who don’t know, Samir, you were the last person to ever speak to Alan, is that right?”

The stage lights were blaring down on Samir and they were hot. He was starting to sweat.

“Yeah, I, uh, yeah, we were coming back home from a couple hours upstate which is actually where his family lives. He’d just introduced me to his whole family. Shout out to his nephew, Benji, my little homie.” The crowd awed. “But, uh, we parted ways at the station, and he was killed in his apartment a couple hours later.”

“Wow, and they never found out who did it?”

“No, Is that... should we be... look, I’ve tried to figure it out, I really have. And if I knew, I’d do everything in my power to make sure justice was served. I’ve used my connections and Alan’s, but we really don’t know.”

“Can you tell us a little bit about that final conversation you had with Alan?”

Samir had quite literally forced that conversation out of his mind.

“Yeah, we were going back to Manhattan together and that was when, for whatever reason, he felt like he was ready to tell me about his relationship with Al Rio. His true relationship with Al Rio.”

“With Alonzo Rio, the rapper.”

“Yeah, and that was a really revelatory moment for me, for our relationship, for his story. I only wish I could have spoken to him about it more because the way that relationship ended between them was really a dark cloud over his entire life.”

“On that subject, you’re currently being sued by Alonzo Rio for defamation. In the book, you claim that he and Alan had a romantic relationship and that caused him to make false accusations against Alan with regard to the Staples Center shooting, which were more rooted in contempt and embarrassment than actual fact. He claims that you made this part of the book up, that they were never romantically involved. And I’m not sure if you’re aware, but as a sort of side effect, rumors have been circulating that he may have been involved in Alan’s untimely death. What do you have to say to that?”

“Well, Lucille, since it’s an ongoing lawsuit, I can’t really speak on it much. But I’ll say this. Again, I’m a journalist, so it’s my job to uncover the truth, however uncomfortable it may be. Nonetheless, I would never, ever, encourage such rumors. I know how hard he must have taken the loss, even if they didn’t speak anymore. So, I want to say I never meant to spark that rumor, and I don’t believe that they are true in the slightest.”

The audience began to cheer.

“Okay, you heard it here first, folks. Now, our time is almost up. This has been a pretty... heavy interview.” The audience laughed. “Samir, you’re a handsome young man, are you single?”

The audience laughed.

“I’m not single, Lucille. Sorry to break it to you.” The audience laughed. “I have a wife, Joanna, and we’re about to have a child as well.” The audience applauded. At the last moment, he added, “I only wish Alan could be a part of it all.” He was sure some of them were shedding tears.

“Wow, well congratulations to you and your wife. Samir Stevens, thank you so much for being here. It seems like things are going really well for you. And I must say, Alan would be proud to see what you’ve done with his story and with your life.” She turned to the camera. “Samir’s fantastic new book, *Stand Up Straight: My Brief Friendship with Alan Brown* is in stores now. Samir, thank you so much for being on the show. Please come back when the movie’s done.”

The audience stood up to applaud. Samir wondered if it was actually louder than usual or if it just seemed that way because of where he was standing. A camera on a crane swept across the room. Lucille gave him a hug and pressed her mouth against his ear.

“The tears were good,” she said. The tears were real. “You’re good at this.”

Backstage, a group of people were congratulating him on his composure and quick reflexes and charm. He was given a bouquet of flowers. It was overwhelming. And it was thrilling. Antonio handed Samir his phone.

“Wow, Samir. I’m impressed,” he said. “You were like a real movie star out there. The tears were a good touch.”

The tears were real.

Samir checked his phone. There were several missed calls and notifications from social media apps, but only two text messages.

The first was from Joanna.

You fucking killed it, baby!!!!

The second was from Kimo.

NEXT TIME I CALL YOU BETTER ANSWER!!!

Samir put the phone away and headed for the green room. He felt warm and giddy and high. He wanted to feel the sensation again. He wanted to go back out there and host the show himself. When the delirium had worn off, he whispered through a wide smile, “Fucking killed it.”

Samir went home and hugged and kissed his wife and they fell back onto the bed, giggling and squealing, feeling good things, finally. The high hadn’t left him. He felt like he was floating towards the ceiling. Joanna was talking, but he wasn’t listening. Not because he didn’t want to. He simply couldn’t.

“I don’t think Kimo’s happy with me right now,” he said.

“Fuck him,” said Joanna. “He doesn’t know the relationship you two had. Alan would be proud.”

“Yeah.” Samir let out a loud huff. “I just wish he was here to say it himself. I think Kimo feels like I’m using all of this to—”

“Hey, enough about Kimo, alright?” She sat up on her knees and bounced a bit. She grabbed his hands with her own and pulled them close to her chest. “Sammy, this was your big night. And you were amazing. Let’s just focus on that.”

He couldn't. And then the suit was suffocating him. He stripped down to his underwear and went into the bathroom. He saw his reflection again. He had been working out. Boxing. He felt strong for the first time in his life. And he was starting to look it, too. In the shower, he cried. Not for any one reason, but the buildup of the night's events—the past two years' events—was cluttering his mind and forcing its way out. When the tears had run their course, he dried himself off. Digging through his underwear drawer, he noticed three items on top of the dresser. The first was the hat he had accidentally taken from the bank the first day he shadowed Alan. The second was a copy of the book. A moody portrait of the late Mr. Brown stared back at him beneath red letters. And the third was his recorder. That little gray box which housed so many secrets. He hadn't had much use for it lately, but he'd recently pulled it out to document a few new film ideas. He set the book on a shelf and pulled out a box in the closet to tuck away the hat. In the box were the documents he was never asked to return, his early drafts, a few more copies of the book, and a stack of tapes. He felt some divine force propel him to sift through the tapes and pull one out from the pile. It was the tape from the night Alan called him while he was in LA. The last time Samir had spoken to him with a clear conscience. It was the only one he'd never listened to. But, it was time to let it all go. He popped it into the recorder, turned off the lights, and lay down on the bed. Joanna curled up next to him and rested her head on his shoulder. He could feel the baby pressing against his arm through her soft stomach. He let himself smile. This had become an infrequent routine for them. Samir felt her warm breath on the side of his neck. He closed his eyes and clicked on the recorder. He heard that deep, familiar, growling voice, slightly muffled, as if speaking through a tin can telephone from another world.

“In my interview with you, you told me you'd seen someone die,” Alan said. “Who was it?”

“I’ve seen a few people die. On some assignments, I’d go places where wars were happening. We’d go through a town and see someone being executed out in a field or hanging from a lamp post. Mass graves, civilian casualties. Real gruesome stuff,” said Samir.

“Yeah. Anyone you knew personally, though?”

“I knew another journalist who was taken hostage and killed. And one of my subjects was caught a few months after we met. They didn’t feel obligated to give him back alive. Otherwise, just my grandfather. My mom’s dad.”

“Your grandfather, how’d he die?”

“Bone cancer. Didn’t even make it to seventy.”

“Were you with him? I mean, when he passed.”

“Yeah, the whole family. We had enough notice, I flew out to London. Me, my mom, my grandma, my little brother. Grandpa’s brother, too.”

“It was good? It was peaceful?”

“As good as it could have been. We buried him with a smile on his face.”

“That’s good. That’s the way to do it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, there are good ways and bad ways to die. And I’m not talking about cause of death, I’m talking about circumstance. Surrounded by family, a priest, in a bed, maybe some peaceful music. That’s the best way to do it. Saddest thing in the world, dying alone. Gas leak, snow storm, heart attack, hiking accident. Nobody even knows you’re gone. Your death doesn’t even really exist. You’re just dead now. Hell, even when you get hit by a car, someone else is there with you. When you’re at war, you’re surrounded by your brothers. Even if they didn’t *see* it, they were there. Nelson Rockefeller died while fucking his secretary, did you know that? She

saw it happen... They say what you don't know can't hurt you. I think it can hurt you way worse. I gotta know, Sammy. I want everyone to know. That's the only way to make it real. My philosophy, Sammy, is that you can't control when you die, but you can do the best you can to control how. In my business, people die so often. Plane crash, overdose, crazed fan, fucking poisoned food. If we do our job right, it's more likely us than the people we're hired to protect. But, you can't protect someone from their fate. That's not part of the job. What I love about my job, Sammy, is that I'm never alone. I don't think I like being alone very much. I don't need the attention, it's not about that. But if you look, go on YouTube or TMZ or the fan pages on Instagram. I'm everywhere. With Lola, with Alonzo, with fucking everybody. There's so much *proof* that I existed. But, take this tech guy I worked for once as an example. Charles Gilhooly. If you look him up, you'll see me in the background of half the photos out there. You'll see him on red carpets, you'll see him out at the club with his friends. You'll see him at board meetings. Jumped off the Tower Bridge in London in the middle of the night. Nobody saw it. Didn't find his body for four days. Saddest thing in the world, dying alone. Hell, he could have at least found a buddy to go down with him. That's why I respect what you do so much. You turn peoples' existence into art. You don't just prove we exist, you prove our existence has meaning, has beauty... Sometimes I wonder if my dad died alone. If he's even dead. Maybe they just found him in his cell one day, lying limp in the corner. No way to know what exactly happened. Or, if he was lucky, maybe one of the guards beat on him a little too hard one day and that was it. Or maybe he never went to prison and died like Rockefeller on some non-extradition island... I think a lot about what happened to Alonzo. And I always tell myself, if he died, at least he wouldn't have died alone." There was a long silence on either end of the phone. "Anyway, if you can't tell, I've had a bit to drink. And I got this girl, dancer chick coming over in about forty-five

minutes, so I guess I should keep telling you my life story, spill my heart and soul out to you while you struggle to think of something to say back to me. It's funny, for a writer, I've noticed you get speechless pretty often. But, hey, you're listening. And that's all I really need you to do."