

# So Say the Waiters

book 1

episodes 1

Justin Sirois

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This is the first episode in a series of novels.  
Print versions of the collected episodes to come.

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Dedicated to Chris Toll

It was the freedom to experiment that made this experiment called Freedom possible.

# Episode 1

*Email chat Thursday, 3:02am*

*3:03am*

XBaltimoreJamesX: like, how many times have you done it already?

HardlyDani: I really don't know. more than most people, i know that.

HardlyDani: maybe eleven or twelve times. i dunno.

XBaltimoreJamesX: CHRIST

XBaltimoreJamesX: i mean jesus christ

*3:10am*

XBaltimoreJamesX: i don't think i could ever do it

HardlyDani: most people would say that, I think

XBaltimoreJamesX: i read about it in the NYTimes

XBaltimoreJamesX: there's no way i'd do it

XBaltimoreJamesX: who knows what kinda creep will take you

XBaltimoreJamesX: you just have no idea what's going to happen

HardlyDani: that's the point. you're giving up complete control. listen, i just got home

from work. i need to go to bed.

XBaltimoreJamesX: what if you want it to stop, tho? what do you do?

*3:12am*

XBaltimoreJamesX: you still there? Dani?

*3:17am*

HardlyDani: YES.

XBaltimoreJamesX: what if you want to stop?

HardlyDani: you choose a safe word. I've never had to use it. 1,2,3... *Repeater*.

XBaltimoreJamesX: you listening to music?

HardlyDani: that was my first safe word, idiot

XBaltimoreJamesX: oh

XBaltimoreJamesX: heh

XBaltimoreJamesX: okay

XBaltimoreJamesX: you working tomorrow?

HardlyDani: just like every other Friday night, yup

XBaltimoreJamesX: so you're not going to do it tonight?

*3:25am*

XBaltimoreJamesX: still there?

HardlyDani: do what? i'm not drunk enough to have cyber sex with you, James

XBaltimoreJamesX: KidnApp. are you going to do it tonight?

HardlyDani: no, not tonight

XBaltimoreJamesX: yeah...

XBaltimoreJamesX: i hear ya

XBaltimoreJamesX: i'm kinda wasted right now

HardlyDani: tired

XBaltimoreJamesX: you want company?

*3:31am*

XBaltimoreJamesX: i'll take that as a no

HardlyDani: too tired



# Chapter 1

The one upside that Henry could see, the absolutely only positive thing about losing Meghan, was the weight loss. The *Extreme Meghan Weight Melting Program*, he called it. The *Meg 2000*. Forty pounds in a month and a half. Astonishing. To his parents, to his coworkers, to himself. All the pre-marriage weight he had stacked on—random weeknights out at restaurant chains “because we deserve it,” cake nearly every weekend at would-be nieces and nephews and grandparent’s birthdays “because it’s a birthday,” and the three to six beers an evening he consumed “because work is so stressful”—those two years of accumulated carbohydrates and sugar and straight bacon fat had vanished in 45 days.

Henry leaned off the couch and hit snooze on his alarm clock.

He hit it again.

\*



While she figured out a permanent living situation, Meghan had chosen to store most of her stuff in their old master bedroom. It was the one remaining hope that she wasn't entirely leaving him—some of her most prized possessions were still there. Henry paused at the door while pacing the hall with his electric toothbrush, waiting for it to pulse one last time, queuing him to switch sides and finish his last row of molars. He flicked on the bedroom light. Blinked at the light. Moved his thumb under the waistband of his boxers. Nothing had changed. Henry stared at the unmade king size bed and the piles of clothes and the stacked suitcases, unwrapped curtains on the treadmill, a toaster oven still in its box, and he accepted that this toothpaste might technically be the only nourishment he would put in his mouth until sundown. The toothbrush pulsed. That was the only certainty he had.

He barely recognized himself in the shower. It was one thing to lose his belly and love handles. It was an entirely other thing to see hipbones appear from once doughy places. Soaping himself, he flexed his stomach muscles and swore that two humps of a six pack appeared just below his chest. *Once Meghan sees me like this, she'll want me back*, he thought. *She'll see the old me.*

That motivated him enough to shave. Admiring his newly defined cheekbones motivated him enough to iron his shirt, but not his pants—the pants were okay—and the motivation quickly faded as he walked the empty and silent house they used to share to the counter where the mortgage bill sat, unpaid. Every extra dollar of every paycheck would go towards that.

Their dog's old food and water bowl sat on the floor next to the sink. She'd taken the dog. That was okay, he guessed.

Henry opened the refrigerator and surveyed the fruit and cucumbers and other healthy foods he started buying. None of it interested him. At the cabinet, he reached for an upside-down glass in the highest shelf to find a hair tie somehow trapped like a bug inside it.

The hair tie fell onto the counter.

Henry's chin trembled. He could see himself in his mind. The man that hadn't cried in eight years was now crying once, twice, sometimes three times a day. Big blubbery sobs that exhausted him like a bad cold. The only remedy was lying on the couch. And if he lay on the couch he needed the television. And if it got to be that the sunset was making the living room just that much more comfortable, then why bother leaving the house or getting up at all?

He stared at the hair tie.

Henry thought he'd found the last of them, the ones lodged in the couch and the ones under the bed, the hair ties behind the toilet and shelves and bureau. Under aspirin bottles. In the glove box. Ashtray. One had made its way inside a sneaker he rarely wore. One had somehow crawled into the refrigerator's crisper. He must have collected fifty of those bastards and grabbed them into one fistful and flung them out the window on his way to work. Watching them scatter and bounce in his side view mirror filled him with a temporary and shallow glee that just embarrassed him to recollect.

*Screw your hair ties, Meghan. All of them.*

That was what he thought during the cherished first week of the breakup, back when he only felt anger and energy—almost a vigor that new freedom could inspire. Now, staring at the hair tie, he couldn't describe the dread he felt if someone paid him to do so.

At least it was Friday.

\*

The security guard, whom no one expected to speak anyway, didn't say it, but everyone else did.

“Happy Friday, Henry.” At the sign in sheet.

“Happy Friday, man.” When he was getting coffee.

Henry raised his cup to them, smiling, envious of their loose uniform policy.

He sat at his desk listening to a local commercial radio station that a coworker played all day long, just within earshot, and he tried to answer emails. The hosts of the morning show had perfected a style of controlled hysteria that so many people seemed attracted to, though Henry tried to ignore it and work. The morning passed without anyone speaking to him in person, and he was grateful and sipped his coffee in relative peace.

He promised himself he would not check his bank account. Although it was Friday, all of that deposit and more was no longer his. Henry knew that the house was too much for them, too soon. Four bedrooms and three baths, the renovated basement that they couldn't afford to fill. They had bought it at the peak of the market at a decent rate, but by the time the housing bubble was over, they'd lost over a third of the equity. Suddenly their investment dream home was worth half what they bought it for.

Henry wasn't even sure if it was worth keeping. Even with a roommate, his budget would be tight.

Craigslist responses filled his inbox: *I'd love to check out the bedroom you have available—are you cool with dogs? I have two pugs / I'd rlly like 2 see the rom u have open. Is the rent \$ negotable? / What's your policy with firearms? / How about a temporary, 2 month deal? / My cat sheds a lot, but she is so, so, so sweet.*

Rapid firing his delete key made his coworker turn her head.

“Bad morning?” she asked.

“Nope.”

At eleven, Henry's cell phone rang. Butterflies uncaged themselves inside his stomach. It wasn't Meghan like he hoped. A number from California. His friend Steven from college. Henry didn't bother listening to the message. Or checking the text from the same number: *you need to call me ASAP.*

Henry opened the timeline for the project he was coding. His presentation was due next week. If he pushed himself, really put in the overtime, he might be able to make

the deadline. Notes and wireframes for web pages covered his cubicle. Two monitors lit up his face. Henry opened his applications and moved the browser windows to exactly where he needed them.

Before lunch, Henry's Supervisor stopped by. "Can you meet me for a second?"

"Sure," Henry said.

Her office was more of a double-wide cubicle whose vestibule functioned as an impromptu meeting area. Mints and small chocolates filled a dish. Portraits of family floated around them along the gray horizon of cube.

"I called you over to talk to you about your absences."

"Oh," Henry said.

"I understand you've been through a lot in the past few weeks, but we can't have you taking so many sick days. Not without a doctor's note. Okay?"

His boss looked genuinely concerned. He didn't blame her. It was her job, of course.

"I understand. I'm feeling a lot better now."

"Well, you're looking great, Henry. That's for sure." She smiled. Her frizzled hair might have been a hybrid of relaxed pompadour and mullet. She nodded at him with her mouth partly open, unsure of what to say. "You must be working out a lot."

"As much as I can." He lied. A vibration tickled his thigh. Another text.

"Just no more sick days for a while," she said.

\*

Back at his desk, Henry checked his phone.

The text wasn't from Meghan. That's all he cared about. Mind racing, he imagined what men she was texting and what kind of sexy pictures she was sending

them—probably the same poses and puckered faces she sent him just a few years ago before he asked her to marry him— before the house and shared accounts and everything.

*Probably sending the same exact photos,* he thought.

In the restroom, Henry let himself cry. Hanging onto the railing inside the handicap stall, he leaned over the toilet and spit heavy yoyos of saliva. He thought he might vomit, but there wasn't enough substance within him to justify the spasms. Someone entered the restroom. Henry froze.

The person shuffled over to a urinal and unzipped and peed. Henry held his breath, relieved it wasn't a handicapped person needing to use the stall. The peeing man left, whistling and wishing someone in the hallway "Happy Friday." A late automatic flush and then silence.

After Henry washed his face, he opened the text message from Steven. *Call me right now. I'm so serious, buddy. Please my buddy.*

Lunch was out of the question. Maybe an apple while he walked the perimeter of the complex. He could call, he guessed.

\*

"Henny!" was the first thing Steven said. "Oh boy. Henny the Henny. What is *up?*"

"I dunno man. You called me."

Henry stood in the parking lot as coworkers walked out in groups, each destined for a local restaurant. It was warm, and he was glad he hadn't been compelled to wear a tie, and he untucked his shirt for as long as no management or executive staff came by.

"Things are good here. Better than good. I'm uh," Steven paused, "I'm going to use the fucking word fantastic, actually. You heard it from me."

"Cool, man. Okay." Henry waited for his friend to ask him how he was doing, but didn't really expect it. "Sorry I've been out of touch. A lot going on."

“Same here, man. That’s why I’m calling. I’ve got an opportunity for you,” Steven said before shouting something to someone on his end, laughing uncontrollably as if putting on a show for Henry. “I bought you a flight out here. For tonight. Leaving in like three hours, actually. You can’t say no.”

Henry threw his free arm in the air. “You know what time it is here? Noon, man. I’m at work! I can’t just leave.”

“Henny. I’m not sure if you’re hearing me. I have a *once in a lifetime* opportunity. I need you.”

Henry loosened the topmost button of his shirt. Smokers and joggers passed him, not paying attention to how hot it was suddenly getting.

“I just can’t. Not today.”

“First class seat. Free booze. All weekend in LA. Are you kidding me, Henry?” Steven used his real name now for some kind of effective reasoning. “And you will *not* regret it. Check your email. I just sent you the itinerary. Don’t even pack. Just get here. We’ll take care of you. Clock’s tickin’.”

Henry sighed. “You’re not doing this because of Meghan?” he asked.

“I saw your profile and no. Not because of shitty Meghan. I’m doing it because I need you. My man. I need someone I can trust. You have *no* idea how much money we’re pulling in now. No idea.”

Henry looked back at the long office building attached to the other even bigger and more gray office building, the confining security outpost and the Ikea-quality landscaping. “Is this about that kidnapping idea you emailed me about a while back? That hipster thing that people are talking about?” he finally asked, knowing the answer.

“Well yes, but no. Not exactly. But yeah. You’ll see when you get here.”

Henry looked at his phone to make sure Meghan hadn’t called. “I guess it would do me some good to get out of Baltimore for a weekend.”

“I haven’t seen you in years, man. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Steven.”

“Woohoo! You’re coming then?”

“Yeah. See you tonight.”

## Chapter 2

This was the dirtiest bar or restaurant or anything that Dani had ever worked at in her four years in the service industry. This included restaurants that withstood prohibition, well-respected eateries on Boston Street that served as fronts for weed and pills, and even a locally famous club that burnt down when the DJ booth caught fire.

Yes, this place was outstandingly filthy. And always damp. It was like bartending in the hull of a leaky pirate ship.

Dani didn't fault the owner for the grime. He had started renting the dilapidated building and needed to open as soon as possible—a thorough stripping and bleaching and remodeling of the place would have to be done piece by piece. And that was okay. It was a rock club. It was a punk-as-fuck indie rock club for metal heads and legit rappers and neo-folk whomevers and that was exactly what it needed to be.



Dani needed to be at the club at 5 pm, no later, for happy hour—a sad and lonely four hours of fending off bums and serving one or two alcoholics who were postponing their ride home to the county.

Dani rode her bike downhill from lower Charles Village, speeding through intersections and passing the same cars that thought they were faster than her. *Idiots*, she thought. Pedaling casually, she enjoyed the late spring breeze and spread her legs and arms and glided past the jail and bail bonds and the other night clubs huddled under the highway leading downtown.

Instead of locking her bike outside like normal, she carried it into the club, leaving the door wide open to air it out from the previous night of sweat and spilled cocktails. She found a patch of shelf behind the bar that wasn't sticky where she could hide her phone and keys and sighed at the typical mess of the place.

Stashing her bike in the basement, she started restocking the bar and filling the sinks. Wetness and old smoke permeated every atom of the joint. Tour posters curled with dampness clung to walls by one paper corner. Nothing adhesive had a chance of survival. Dani turned on the soundboard, started her iPod, opened a beer, and got to cleaning.

\*

By nine o'clock, the sound person came in, a girl her age from Texas or somewhere. She immediately hopped up into her sound booth, no larger than an old phone booth, and started flipping switches. "Hey, Dani."

"Hey. I've got some extra Pad Thai if you want it."

"Thanks. I brought my own food, though."

"You think it'll be busy tonight?" Dani asked as she dunked the sticky soda gun in a pitcher of hot water.

"Got blogged about on Baltimore Boilermaker. I think we'll have a crowd," the sound girl said. "No other shows tonight anyway."

Dani picked a cigarette butt up off the floor. Must have been the owner's. "Good, I need to pay my rent."

Regulars started showing up. There were the loyal ones that staked out their spot at the bar for the night, huddled over it until their bladders were about to rupture. They drank from the cheap happy hour menu, but typically threw down a dollar tip per drink. Good people. There were younger kids, just out of college and a lot who had never bothered with it, who grabbed a quick beer and ran upstairs to play pool, thinking Dani hadn't notice being stiffed any gratuity. They'd be disappointed once it got busy. They'd become invisible. And on Friday night, it should get busy.

Dani checked the upstairs while she could, looking to see if someone had bothered to empty the trash the night before, making sure no one was raiding the poorly locked upstairs bar, checking the bathrooms for underage kids and smokers. She didn't really mind if they were there, but the cops did and that meant the owner did and, ultimately, she did.

Two guys in their early twenties were bent over the Miss PacMan machine—too transfixed to turn around.

It only took half an hour and the DJs were set up. Two guys with glasses that switched off every half hour until the edges of 2 am. They were good and knew how to keep a floor moving, but on a Friday night with no door charge, there was nowhere else to dance for free. The place would be packed anyway.

Once the door guy arrived, she always felt better. No cover meant anyone could walk in, no matter their age, and once it got busy it was impossible to monitor the first floor let alone the large second floor with its dark corners and hidden doors. The door guy sat on a stool with his big beard and black wife beater and looked the part. Her bar-back showed up just as the downstairs started to fill. "Sorry I'm late," he said, clomping in with his cowboy boots. She had no idea how he worked in them. "My ride," was his only explanation.

"No biggie. Just grab me a few cases of Boh from the basement."

“National Bohemian coming up,” he joked in a carney-like voice, a voice that really said *are you making me work the second I arrive?*

\*

It wasn't necessarily her drink-making skills Dani relied on. If someone asked for an Old Fashioned or a Perfect Manhattan or a Sidecar, specifically anything that involved muddling or sprigs or a damn blow torch, she would have to consult her Bartender's Bible—a dusty copy that was sandwiched between the microwave and the crusty coffee maker. Luckily, no one was going to order those. Or anything with more than two or three components. A Long Island Iced Tea would be the most extravagant cocktail anyone might splurge on. They didn't have a blow torch anyway.

What Dani knew she had was speed.

“Give me two Bohs, a vodka and cranberry, a Jack and Coke, and ahh...” The girl turned to ask what her friend wanted, yelling at her over the music, asking again and again while Dani looked at the eyes of the other anxious customers. “And another Jack and Coke.”

Dani took both glasses and scooped them into the ice bin with one hand while pivoting to grab the Jack and vodka with her other, making both drinks at once. Thirty seconds later, the girl had those and her beers and was off dancing. “Thank you!” Dani popped can after can of cheap beer, knowing what each regular preferred, holding up the can before opening it to wait for their nod. But most of the Boh drinkers simply left their change as a tip—a meager fifty cents.

“Fuckers,” she said.

“Gimme a Boh!”

“Another, Dani! Hey!”

By ten o'clock, the dance floor was stomping and spinning as the crowd pushed patrons closer to the bar. Even with the air conditioners blasting, the temperature had raised fifteen degrees. Dani dried off her neck and folded a bar rag into her back shorts

pocket. She poured one of her regulars a shot of whiskey and one for herself and slugged it with one gulp, not a word exchanged between them.

Jen, one of her bandmates tried to get to the bar, yelling, “Practice Monday!” Dani knew she was just calling it out for attention—they both knew what day practice was.

“Yup!” Dani yelled back with a quick thumbs up.

She gave away a round of shots to the guy who always brought four or five new friends with him. Small investments in her growing and loyal clientele. Did another shot with him.

More and more people poured in. All varieties of subcultures and gender preferences and skin colors. Scruffy guys with wispy beards and mustaches in neon tank tops—sockless and proudly destitute. Girls sporting big backpacks with god knows what inside them. Headbands floated. Raised hands flapped by. Young looking kids and older guys with pockmarked skin and combed forward hair who sipped cider and went on and on about 60s Soul and Garage Rock and other obscure shit she didn’t care about. Rocker girls with big black hair with their boyfriends with almost-as-pretty hair. It was a perfect survey of all things remotely underground, but nothing was truly underground now that the internet existed.

Although she hated most of them—and hating strangers was okay—she appreciated the self-made community of the party, diversity and difference giving way to a common goal of good times and cheap liquor and rarely satisfying hookups.

And, like the door guy and the DJs and the sound girl, Dani knew she looked the part. That was inevitable. Tattoos and a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a tank top was all she needed to both neutralize herself as *one of them*, but also feel unique and attractive and comfortable enough to work.

“Five shots of Jaeger and a Yeungling and a Boh!”

“I spilled my drink. Can I get another?”

“Again?” Dani asked, always skeptical.

Credit cards lined the shelf behind the bar. Under each sat their corresponding tabs that flapped like white tongues as she breezed by. Dani blasted through a dozen drink orders to get the bar satiated before grabbing her phone and ducking to the basement stairs. “Cover me for a sec?” she asked her bar-back.

With her screen lighting up the dark, Dani opened KidnApp and checked which one of her friends might have been taken tonight. She scrolled through names and profile photos. Kimberly in DC was waiting to be taken—she had submitted her app a few hours ago. Alex, a girl she knew from the club but hadn’t seen in months, had just a few hours until she was scooped up by one of the Takers that Dani had come to admire.

“Kimberly, Kimberly,” she said, wishing there was a way to view the parameters of Kim’s submission—what she had requested, how far she was willing to go—how deep her submission actually was. “I would have never thought you’d be a Waiter.”

\*

Crawling back into the light, Dani hid her phone and filled as many drink orders as she could. Bass cracked in her ears. Leaning in, she tried to hear each order, pulling beer taps and cans out of the dented coolers. Looking to the corner of the bar by the sound booth, two people were making out, the guy grinding the girl, her skirt way too high. Whatever. As long as they were drinking.

Her bar-back handed her a beer that he opened for someone who said they ordered something else. “I heard Heavy Seas.”

“What did he say?”

“Bacardi Breeze!”

“Breezer?”

“Yeah!”

“Oh my GOD. Gross.”

They both cackled and poured another shot and Dani washed it down with the mis-opened beer. Her bar-back scooped up their tips and stuffed them in their tip jar. They both sized up their take. *Not nearly enough yet to make rent*, Dani thought.

\*

Bonnie, her roommate, showed up around midnight. She carried her fixed-gear bike over the crowd, bumping heads and scraping people with her petals. “I rode down here. We can ride back together.”

“Awesome. Thanks!” Dani said and opened a Boh for her without charging. She took her bike and maneuvered it into the basement stairway. “You see Kyle here?”

“Naw. Haven’t,” Bonnie said.

Dani looked around the room. She hadn’t seen him all night. “Tell him he’s got a shot on me if you see him.”

“Okay.”

In the middle of the bar, someone was trying to push through. Tim’s face appeared. Dani rushed over. “What cha drinking?”

“You know!”

Dani pulled out his usual and stood on her toes to reach over other customers to serve Tim first. “Thanks for the blog post about tonight! I think it really filled the place up!”

He nodded and held up his money, which Dani waved away. Tim tipped her the price of the beer and ducked into the crowd.

Dani fanned the room for Kyle one more time before tackling the rest of her grabby customers. Three Bohs, a Heavy Seas, three Kamikazes, and a Stoli Vanilla and Coke. She pirouetted around her speeding bar-back as he lowered new six packs into the cooler and wiped down the flooded bar top and made change from their growing tips. One Mind Eraser, one Black and Tan, one Long Island, and one Cosmo. Dani groaned.

Probably the worst combination to order from a slammed bartender. The person left a two dollar tip.

Dani scanned the bar to make sure she hadn't missed anyone. Everyone seemed happy.

James appeared at the corner of the bar. His spot. The spot where he could hug her even if she didn't want to be hugged. He waited, not waving. Cool and patient with his folded arms. Dani filled a few more orders before walking over.

"Sorry I kept you up last night chatting," he said, referring to the email chat. He smiled coyly.

"You didn't. I was just up."

"Can I get a drink?"

Dani poured him his regular and said it was on her, unsure why she gave him a drink. James stood there and sipped and bobbed his head to the music. People swayed around them, rocking everyone into the bar, hair and hands flying. *Future Islands*.

James nodded, about to step away. Dani looked down at the bar and leaned toward him. "If you want to fuck me so bad, why don't you tip me?" Dani said just softly enough for him to shake his head.

"Huh?"

"If you want another free drink, go tell the door guy we might be over capacity!"

"Okay!" He nearly ran for the door.

"*Asshole*," Dani said, making her bar-back shake his laughing head.

\*

When Dani checked her phone again, Kimberly's status said she had been taken. Some girl named Elke had just submitted. Another named Cynthia. *Who the hell was*

*named Cynthia these days?* Dale, one of the few guys she knew that was into KidnApp had hit submit too. *An active Friday night*, Dani thought.

She put her phone away.

She looked out at the crowd—sweaty and grinding and crawling over one another—wondering if any of these people were waiting to be taken, if any of them had that nervous energy that Dani felt more and more excited by. Looking at them, trying to see the crowd as individuals, she could never tell who might be brave enough to try. *Most of them were hipster posers anyway*, she thought, consuming rather than creating culture.

At last call, the door guy clapped his hands and pulled beers from the clutches of barely legal drinkers. “Gotta go! Gotta go home and feed your cats and dogs! They miss you! Go HOME!”

People slowly made their way to the exit. They yelled and laughed in the alley, honked their car horns and unhooked their bikes. The DJ’s thanked her for the payout as they packed up. Milk crates of records dragged to the door. Dani paid the sound girl and the door guy. Yawning and groggy, she tried to make sense of the credit card machine’s complicated close-out receipt.

While her bar back scrubbed and restocked, Dani counted out the drawer and their tips. She made just enough to cover rent and maybe food for the week.

James sat down at the bar. He knew the door guy well enough to hang around after hours. “You’ve got two choices. After hours party with me or dinner tomorrow night.”

“You’re funny, James.” Dani said.

Her bar back ducked out of the conversation and stuck his head into a cooler as he restocked.

“I’m *tired*.” Dani said.



“Me too. That’s why dinner is probably the best choice,” he reasoned. “We can check out that new farm to table place that’s probably just like all the other farm-to-table places.”

Dani sighed and recounted the till she had just lost count of. “I’ll text you tomorrow,” she said. “Let me work.”

“That’s a yes,” James said. “Awesome.”

“I will text you with my answer. *Tomorrow.*”

Bonnie stood with her arms crossed by the sound booth.

“I’m thinking about trying it, you know,” James said plainly.

Dani kept counting. Not hearing him.

“*Tomorrow,*” she repeated.

\*

Even after a night’s work, Dani was still a stronger rider than Bonnie. It didn’t help that Bonnie took out her cell phone every ten blocks to check incoming texts. Dani glided through the trash-lined alley and turned north as Bonnie followed within talking distance.

“God, he really likes you, Dani.” Bonnie said, pedaling hard to keep up.

“Sure does.”

“You should give him a chance.”

“I dunno,” Dani said, her mind on Kyle, wondering why he hadn’t shown, wondering if he was out with someone else.

The uphill climb to lower Charles Village was easy on a normal day. On an afternoon after the farmer’s market or a day of drinking along the cobblestoned streets by the water, the hills were a welcome challenge—a sure way to burn a few hundred

calories. But after a night of hopping on her flats and slamming coolers shut with her hips, the trip made owning a car seem more and more attractive. She would never do it. Cars were part of the problem with America, one of the major problems with the unsustainable infrastructure and one of the biggest contributors to global insecurity. And, more importantly, they took up too much fucking space on the roads. Another reason not to have a car was the payments. Upkeep. Insurance. Gas money. Parking tickets. Break-ins.

Riding a bike drunk, although technically illegal, felt safer than driving and on a weekend night in Baltimore the cops had way bigger problems to deal with. Some swerving girl on an old 10-speed wasn't going to attract a police copter's spotlight.

As they reached the bridge, Dani had a block lead on her roommate. She slowed and let Bonnie catch up, knowing that riding alone so late was inviting trouble. Although this part of town had developed over the years she lived in the city, it wasn't perfect and they'd known plenty of people who had been mugged.

"Thanks," Bonnie said, slightly annoyed.

At their warehouse space, Dani unlocked the giant steel door. Some new neighbors, a little younger than them, were sitting on the stairs with paper-wrapped 40s. They seemed too paranoid to acknowledge them. The smell of weed wafted from around the corner.

In their apartment, they hung their bikes and turned on their laptops and charged their phones. Somewhere from within the massive building, bass rumbled and pulsed their windows like glass drums. Someone else in another corner of the warehouse was looping and distorting something resembling Doctor Mario or Mario Cart, neither of which Bonnie or Dani could fully identify.

"Probably Mario Cart," Dani said. Her tea kettle steamed, ready. She poured two cups. Then poured a healthy shot of Jim Beam into both.

Bonnie checked her phone again. "I think I'm going to go out."

“Huh? It’s like 3 am. We just got home.”

“I know. I just don’t want to go to bed yet.”

“Neither do I.”

Bonnie was already shutting down her laptop and lifting her bike off its hooks. She took her tea and sipped as much as she could, nodding and shying her eyes to the door. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to explain. I understand. It’s not that older guy from that what’s it called band?”

“No, no, no.” Bonnie’s hand turned the doorknob.

“Sure, sure, sure.” Dani mocked. She picked up Bonnie’s mug and poured it back into the tea kettle. “Just be safe.”

“I’m not going far.”

\*

Slipping off her flats to rub her feet, Dani sat on the window ledge of their living room and watched Bonnie ride away. Her tea had cooled enough to drink. She was wide awake. Pinging chat boxes filled the corner of her computer screen. No one interesting and no one even within her time zone.

She rocked back and forth, letting her carabineer-attached key slap the sill to the beat of the neighbor’s bass. *Another party*, she thought. *Those older hip hop guys maybe.*

In a warehouse of some of the most interesting people in the city—interdisciplinary artists and experimental musicians, theatre groups and programmers, even green-minded renegade farmers who usurped a wide patch of the roof for tomato cages—Dani felt like the loneliest person in the city. All she had to do was text James to know where the after-party was. One text and she could be sleeping with him with no real emotional attachment or fallout or evil eyes from common friends. They would all come see her at the bar again. It would be just as easy to walk barefoot just a few hundred yards

towards that thumping bass, open the unlocked door, and sit next to the closest stranger with a ball cap and blunt.

Instead she unlocked her phone with a gentle slide. KidnApp already running. KidnApp telling her which new people in her network might have filled out their requests and submitted drunkenly in the hopes of being taken that night, within an hour, within a breath of the door.

Dani stood to get the whiskey from the kitchen. One-handed, she typed in the parameters she wanted: how long she would be taken, how rough the Taker could be, what should and shouldn't and where not to and for how long—detailed as she could be, but leaving some up to the individual assigned to take her because they were paid to be creative. From her experience, they were creative. They could express anonymous gestures that meant more to her than what most friends had ever offered. Sometimes, most times, the heavier the gesture, the better.

She reviewed her submission. Scrolled up and down. Everything correct. She would only be taken for six hours this time. She took a long draw from the bottle of whiskey and shook her head and blew hard out of both nostrils. Then Dani hit *submit*.

## Chapter 3

Lunch was only half over. Henry walked inside. Meghan called while he swiped his ID badge at the guard's desk. By the time Henry had slipped his badge back in its hard plastic sleeve, the phone had switched to voicemail, and he cursed himself back to his desk. Luckily he sat down unseen.

Her message:

“I know you're at work so it's tough to talk, but I was wondering if I could stop by sometime this weekend to pick some more stuff up. I'll have a pickup truck all weekend. Okay? I hope you're doing alright. Okay. Bye.”

Henry listened to the message three times before saving it.

He called Meghan back, but she didn't answer. Knowing his coworkers would overhear, Henry hung up and texted instead of leaving a voicemail. His shaking thumbs typed:

*I'm out of town this weekend, but will be back first thing Monday. I'll be around all week. Please let me know. I miss you.*

He hit send.

*Oh God, he thought. Why did I type "I miss you"?*

Henry stood in his cubicle and looked over the gray partitions for floating heads of combed hair. No neckties or suit jackets hovered there. Leaning over, he opened his email and printed the itinerary of his flight and drafted a four sentence email to his center director:

*Feeling food-poisoned after lunch. Probably not the best idea to introduce sushi to my system after not eating for so long. Going to take the afternoon off. Call me if you need me.*

Fingers and hands and arms shaking now, he signed out and ducked down the hall before the rest of the staff returned from lunch.

\*

Although he was a little hungry now, Henry waited to eat on the plane. Pinching every penny would be tough, but until he found a reliable roommate, he would have to restrain himself.

Henry parked in the cheapest lot. The shuttle took its time picking him up and dumping him at his terminal. He made his flight in just enough time. Not having any type of bag or briefcase was a relief. Henry wondered if he had looked suspicious going through security empty-handed, but no one questioned him or found it necessary to pat him down. He was just another weekend warrior in business clothes.

First class seating made him feel like a king. He let the catcher's mitt seat swallow him up, let a flight attendant pamper him with a hot towel and a glass of water only minutes after sitting. He watched all the peasants in coach march past him, single file, avoiding his eyes. Henry sipped his water and looked out the window and tried to keep his mind off Meghan.

Switching his phone off before being asked to, sent a rush of relief over him. Untethered, he was free to forget. In no time, they were in the air.

"This is my first time," he admitted to his neighbor.

"Flying?" she asked with surprise.

"In first class," Henry said, a little embarrassed.

"First cocktail's on me." She winked.

Henry flipped through the Sky Mall until it got creepy. Vacuums for spiders and giant crossword puzzles and lasers that promised hair regeneration. After drinking and eating he napped in the great and cushy chasm of his first class throne, forgetting about the world below and the trouble of home. Another flight attendant woke him just before landing.

"That was quick!" Henry said much louder than he planned.

"Anything before we land in Los Angeles?"

\*

Henry stepped off the plane and into the rush of LAX. Everyone seemed taller and more put together. Men checked their oversized watches and used their blackened cell phone screens to make sure their hair was in place. Long-legged women in tall boots strode by like gazelles to their predetermined gates. Every fifth person could have been mistaken for a model.

Henry found the nearest bathroom. Waited for a urinal. The only text message he had when he turned on his phone was from Steven: *look for the guy with the sign*. That's

all it said. Meghan was either pissed about him not being at the house this weekend or she was spooked by his *I miss you*. Probably both.

He thought about texting her again to apologize, but stopped himself and cursed himself for being so pathetic. Henry read Steve's message again and shook his head. He bought a coffee because he was too polite to ask the flight attendant for one before they landed. He walked between rows of fast food and casual dining in a hazy state of malnourished satisfaction, neither hungry nor happy, just overwhelmed that he had woken up on the other side of the country where, only hours ago, he was sitting at his desk, dreading all the free time he would have to wallow in on Saturday and Sunday.

At baggage claim he saw the guy with the sign: the handwritten word HENRY and the eight pointed chauffeur hat gave him away. He was stocky and wore large aviator sunglasses above his large mustache. White gloves made it even harder to tell how old the guy was.

“Henry?”

“Steven didn't have to do all this.” Feeling too disheveled to deserve a chauffeur, Henry wiped the drying drops of coffee from his white plastic lid.

“Come with me, sir.”

\*

The drive was long through rush hour traffic, but it didn't matter. The limo Henry had been ushered into had a television with cable news and a full bar with ice and Diet Cokes, which he helped himself to once his coffee started tasting like chalk. Along the opposite shelf sat a row of half a dozen bottles of Hennessy.

“Steve thinks this is funny, right?” Henry lobbed his thumb at the bottles of Hennessey. “Henny. Hennessey... my old nickname?”

The driver didn't respond.



Henry was happy to drink his soda and watch CNN. Even with all his caffeine consumption, he kicked off his shoes, put his feet up, and managed to sleep for another hour.

\*

Henry awoke as they were pulling into a nondescript suburb of new houses. The car half circled a cul-de-sac and parked. Steven stood at the end of the driveway.

“Henry!” he yelled with open arms. Opening the car door, he grabbed and hugged his friend hard. “Holy shit. HOLY shit.”

“I’m here.” Henry said as he sat his Coke on the car’s roof. “I can’t believe it. Literally. Can’t.”

Steven walked over to the driver and tipped him and said something in private before grabbing his friend around the shoulder. He walked him up to the house.

“You look *great*, dude. I mean, you’re thinner than in college. How much weight have you lost?” Steven hugged him around the waist and slapped his stomach.

Henry cringed, “Forty something. I dunno.”

“Awesome. You look awesome.”

“Yeah. I don’t feel awesome.”

Steven stopped them before the door and turned Henry around by the shoulders. “I can fix that, Henry. I’m here to *fix* that.”

“Yeah.”

\*

Despite being under-furnished, the house was immaculate. They walked straight to the kitchen.

Henry knew that Steven must have paid someone to design the interior—installing the granite countertops and fixtures—matching stainless steel appliances surrounding them. He wondered if even an ounce of gas had been used in the commercial grade oven and range. The kitchen island’s centerpiece was a fresh bowl of fruit, which Steven would never have bought himself.

“You have a maid?” Henry joked.

“I have a butler. His name is Jonathan.” Steven grinned, opening up the refrigerator and stacking ingredients for margaritas by the blender. A lime rolled onto the floor. Henry chased after it. “He’s out at the moment.”

Steven poured them drinks.

They leaned on the counter and drank and reminisced about college. “You remember the time you thought you saw a ghost *and* a UFO in the same night?” Henry laughed. “You woke me up shaking.”

“Dude, that house was so haunted!”

“You were so *stoned*.”

“*You* were the one that pissed in Gatorade bottles and kept them at the foot of your bed instead of getting up!”

“God! Remember your friend? The one that nearly drank one?”

“I thought he *did* drink one!” Steven nearly fell on the floor laughing. “That’s how I tell the story, anyway.”

Throughout the hour they retold stories. Two different people walked up from the basement. One guy just walked up to use the bathroom and walked back down. Twenty minutes later someone else appeared.

“Oh here,” Steven said to a girl with a lip ring and a half shaved head. “Hold on. Lemme blend another for you guys.” He started cutting more limes and looked up at

Henry. "I've got a change of clothes for you upstairs. A whole wardrobe of crap you can choose from. Some gnarly shit, too."

"Cool."

*Gnarly?* Henry thought.

The girl smiled and waited, looking over at Henry. He got the feeling she knew who he was, but wasn't going to say anything. She reached into the refrigerator and unwrapped a single slice of processed cheese and took the pitcher from Steven, saying, "See you down there?"

"In a minute."

The girl disappeared.

"*What* the hell was that?"

"Donna?" Steven shrugged.

"What's going on?"

"C'mon."

\*

The basement looked more like a command center than a rec room. Four programmers sat at a circular table with two or three monitors a piece. A wall of servers as large as gas pumps hummed along the wall. Pinball machines flanked the other side of the room where a ski ball machine hugged a heavy bag with boxing gloves draped over it.

"Wow," Henry said. "Online gaming man-cave?"

"Welcome to kidnApp headquarters. In my basement," Steven smiled. He hunched over the girl with the lip ring and watched her work. "Guys, this is Henry, the college friend I was telling you about. Henry, this is Donna, Alex, Glen, and Allan."

The four employees said hello and passed the pitcher of margarita, drinking straight from it. Steven took a gulp and shrugged, “It’s Friday. They’re allowed to drink after lunch on Fridays. C’mere.”

The thought of beers or liquor at his office was laughable.

Henry hunched over and watched.

Steven’s eyes widened.

“Friday’s typically one of our busiest days. People have the weekend off, they’ve got some free time to disappear. We peak on long weekends and holidays, that much we’ve learned.”

“Last memorial day was crazy,” a employees with a backwards ball cap said. “All of our Takers were out.”

Henry tried to make sense of the monitors in front of him. “You’re going to have to explain all this to me like a baby. I don’t get it.”

“Basically what we do here is monitor all submissions. We’ll read through what the Waiter wants, deem what is reasonable, and pair that Waiter up with a Taker that makes sense. Some Takers have specialties. Some are just heavy lifters.”

The whole team chuckled.

“Waiters are the people being kidnapped?” Henry asked.

“Sounds better, we found. Some people only want to be taken for an hour or so. A lunch break sometimes, if you can believe that. And then we have more committed Waiters. They can be demanding.”

Henry straightened his back and rubbed his neck.

“Do you have to take them all? All the ones that submit?”

“We tried that at first. It just wasn’t logistically possible. Our policy is you might be taken in the 48 hour window... and most Waiters are taken. We just can’t get them all. Yet.”

One of the employees got up and chose a free soda from one of the many vending machines along the back wall. *Free sodas and margaritas*, Henry thought. *It would take an act of congress to approve that at the agency.*

“But what happens when a non-Taker kidnaps someone?” Henry asked.

“Isn’t really possible,” Steven explained, “only our Takers have the administrative version of the app. Only they can see where each Waiter is, in real-time.” Steven pointed to a monitor’s map of blinking Waiters. “Right now it costs only five bucks an hour to be taken.”

“Five dollars an hour?” Henry asked.

“Yeah. The subscription fees from the users who never submit more than balances out our costs. Way more.”

The team collectively chuckled.

“Jeez.” Henry said.

“It’s a phenomenon we really couldn’t predict. So many subscribers just use kidnApp as a voyeuristic service. Just the possibility of being able to submit is enough.”

“Lucky for you guys.”

“Anyway, you guys good down here?” he said, checking his watch. “Need anything?”

“All good!” they answered.

\*

Upstairs, in his bedroom, Steven explained the situation while Henry surfed through his walk-in closet for something to wear.

“It started small, you know? It was a joke at first. Just a side project to occupy our heads while we worked on real applications.”

“The credit card thing you were trying to sell,” Henry remembered as he held up a t-shirt and tossed it back in the drawer it came from.

“Yeah, that disaster.” Steven sat on the edge of the bed. “We were looking at a new GPS app and talking about already popular hook-up apps saying to ourselves that the infrastructure was already there. All we had to do was create a comfortable forum for this thing to flourish.”

“And it did?” Turned away, Henry traded his dress pants for a new pair of jeans. “People are comfortable with this?”

“Yes, dude. It’s crazy.”

“You have enough people who are willing to be *kidnapped* for a few days to turn a profit? I don’t believe it.”

Steven stood. “The thing is, most people that own the app, they fill out their form and never submit. That’s the best thing about this, Henry. People are paying five dollars a month just to have the ability to do it, just to have the access. They don’t have to actually commit. It’s about the *fantasy* just as much as the act.”

“You’re kidding me. What percentage?”

“We’re estimating over 90% of users don’t actually use the app. And once they buy, over 90% of that 90% keep it on their phones. Recurring charges.” Steven snorted his geeky snort. Something Henry used to mock in college to get him to realize how unflattering it was. Now, in their early 30s, it was too painful to make fun of.

Henry stood shirtless, rummaging.

“Man, if you worked out some you’d be ripped.”

“Do not say things like that.”

“Just sayin’. Back in the game and all.”

Henry looped a belt through his new jeans and stood in an undershirt while going deeper into the closet. Looking down, he noticed the rows of new shoes. He was afraid to ask what Steven wanted from him so he asked simpler questions, opening Steven up to the point. That never really worked with him anyway. “Where did all this stuff come from?”

“Our advertisers, dude. That’s the other awesome part.”

“Ads? Really?”

“On non-premium users’ apps. If you pay ten dollars a month, you don’t have ads. Our most loyal customers upgrade to premium. You wouldn’t believe which celebrities have the app on their phones.”

“This is too much.”

“Take whatever you want. We’re going out tonight to meet the crew.”

“I thought I already met the crew.”

“Oh, I mean *the crew*.”

\*

Two programmers left the house as Steven and Henry did. Steven opened the garage and watched both programmers enter separate houses across the street.

“Your neighbors work for you?” Henry asked, following his friend into the garage.

“I own every house on the cul-de-sac. If you work for kidnApp in LA, you live here for free.” The alarm on Steven’s BMW disarmed. “Wanna drive?”

Henry poked his head back outside and surveyed the six total houses facing each other within the circle. All identical. All huge and perfectly maintained. “Your town, man. You show me around.”

They sat.

“That’s the plan.”

\*

They ate fish tacos from a truck that Steven swore were the best in the city. Steven insisted on paying. Henry felt like he was actually eating real food for the first time in over a month. They sat on the pier and stared at the waves. Sunset and warmth and salt radiating through Henry’s pores and armpits. He unbuttoned his new shirt—which he happened to really like—and let the breeze fill his undershirt like a white balloon before the wind died.

Surfers glided inland. Entire squadrons of gulls arced with the breeze, eyeing the boardwalk for French fries and bits of burger. Everything was immediate and lovely and bare for everyone, anyone to take in.

Steven took a call and let his friend think.

People in shorts and bikini tops and towels walked by. Bare legs on long bicycles. Henry turned his pale arms back and forth and sighed. He could see Steven laughing and talking from across the pier. He was gone for a while, but Henry didn’t mind.

Besides his newfound confidence, Steven hadn’t changed a bit since college.

\*

Afterwards they drove along Pacific Ave through Santa Monica and Del Rey. It was so strange seeing nerdy Steven rolling in such an expensive and well-detailed car—even weirder to see him drive it so confidently, the same lactose intolerant programmer that would have the flu every six months and constantly seemed to be pricked with allergy tests from his doctor. Steven rolled the windows down, but kept the air



conditioner blasting. This new sense of excess thrilled Henry more than he felt comfortable liking, but he let himself like it anyway. He had never seen such tall palm trees or tall and attractive people. He ran his fingers through his hair and thanked God it wasn't thinning yet and felt better about his own tallness.

"We're headed to a club," Steven said.

Henry squirmed. He rubbed the door's leather handle. "Man, I dunno if my budget allows for that. Things are tight with Meghan not living at the house."

"This weekend is on me, dude. Jesus. C'mon." Steven slapped Henry's thigh. "This is a *business* trip for you."

"Steven. I don't even know why I'm here. I'm not a programmer. I'm not a ki-Taker-napper, that's for sure. I barely understand how this works."

"You've never seen the app?" Steven asked, a little shocked. "It's bigger on the west coast, I guess."

"Why would I spend five bucks a month on that?"

"Same reason why 600,000 people already do," Steven snorted. "Might be more this week. I haven't checked the stats today."

"You're *kidding* me."

"Highest concentrations are in major cities—New York, Chicago, Austin, San Fran, here in LA. A surprising number have started using in Atlanta and even Orlando. We project we'll hit a million users in a few months. Remember, they aren't all active users. Most of them *never* hit submit. Fascinating."

"So what happens when they do?"

Steven cleared his throat. Opened the glove box and grabbed a tissue. After blowing his nose he continued, "Hit submit? Well, they fill out their form. The ins and outs of what they want the experience to be—tame or rough, fetishes or not—they mark how long they'd like to be taken—choose a safe word, something simple," Steven stuffed

his used tissue in his khaki pocket, “and specify if they prefer the same Taker if they’re a repeat user.”

“How long do they have until they’re taken?”

“48 hours. That’s the window. It usually happens within the first 24. That’s when the user becomes a Waiter—waiting to be taken.”

Henry found himself taking out his cell phone without even knowing it. His one text message was from a coworker: *where’d you go today? I overheard Management talking about you leaving.* His heart started thumping hard. Henry closed the text and surfed for kidnApp in the apps store.

“And they aren’t always taken. If all of our Takers are busy, the Waiter has to resubmit. No one has complained.”

Steven pulled into a parking lot and up to valet. Out of the car, he shook the hand of the attendant like he knew him. Security staff shook his hand too.

“You know everyone here?” Henry marveled. Now this was something unbelievable.

Steven shrugged as they walked to the front of the line and were let inside.

\*

Henry had always laughed at the posers who could afford table service in the VIP section. *What was the point, he thought, of having your own bottle of Grey Goose when it was three times as expensive and no one drank it all?* He had only been to one of the nightclubs in Baltimore with VIP and felt excluded enough to leave after an hour, having spent more than he wanted to anyway.

This felt different.

A hostess—also on a first name basis with Steven—escorted them to a balcony, to a table encircled by a high-backed booth with a red rope cordoning off access to anyone

unworthy. A bucket of ice and bottles of Patron and Hennessy and Belvedere waited with as much condensation as Henry's forehead.

"This is over the top," Henry said.

"Sit. Please," Steven offered. "We've got friends coming. Good people. You'll like them."

"It's just too much." Henry took a corner of the round booth and let one of the hostesses pour him what he wanted.

"Henny," Steven wiggled his finger at his drink as the hostess poured, signaling for more, "this is why you're here. I want to get you in on the ground level on this one. Not as a partner necessarily, but as a primary stakeholder. Someone I can trust."

*Someone I can trust* was somewhat of a theme with his old friend.

Henry watched the club slowly fill up. Women in tiny dresses and men dressed like semi-retired James Bonds. All of them tan and fit. From the door, they meandered to the bar, men mostly, in packs, some of them carrying back three drinks in two hands to return for the rest.

The dance floor was empty, but the DJ was firing for full effect, trying to lure people into motion. It was too early in the night for that, even Henry knew.

"I can't *kidnap* people for you," Henry said, still looking to the main floor. "I just can't. I don't care if it's for recreation or what."

Steven moved his propped up foot to the floor and scooted closer to his friend. "Henry, I need you for bigger things than that. Management. Recruitment. You'll be using all the skills you've learned over the past decade." He took a drink and finished half the glass with one gulp. "I've always hated the term *kidnap*. I'm sure just as many adults are abducted as children every year. Around the world, I mean."

Henry made no indication that he heard. It was then that they heard someone calling Steven's name, but it sounded more like *Sleeve* because maybe this person was actually calling him *Sleeve*.

"Sleeve!" said the smiling guy standing over them. "Sleeven!"

"Sit, sit, sit," Steven said, instantly red-faced.

Behind the guy stood the chauffeur from the airport. He sat down too and made himself a drink.

"Henry, this is Brian," pointing to the smiling guy, "and Glen," pointing to the chauffeur. "I think you might have met Glen earlier."

"Hey," Henry said, trying not to stare at Glen's shiny hat and sunglasses and mustache. A second later Glen removed all three, in that order, tearing off the mustache like a strip of Velcro from his upper lip and placing it in a glass of ice. It sagged there like a caterpillar. It was the same Glen from the command center in Steven's basement.

"Wait..." Henry said. "You."

"Glen's one of our best Takers. He also helped me write the code for kidnApp."

Glen raised his glass. "I parked the limo behind the house and snuck into the basement. You're from Baltimore, right? *The Wire*, man. Omar comin'!"

"Oh, *hell* yeah," some anonymous voice chimed in.

Henry stood. "I need to use the restroom."

Everyone looked at each other. Steven nodded.

\*

Henry elbowed his way through the thickening crowd towards the back of the club. The seams of a panic attack threatened to split around his head, though he hadn't had that feeling in almost a decade—since his senior year of college. Everything had instantly changed. The frayed networks tying the world together just became less

trustworthy. Walking through the club, seeing so many people checking their cell phones, it was impossible to look at their faces and body types and dress, their hairstyles and mannerisms and not wonder if this guy by the coat check or this heavy girl talking too loudly might be waiting to be snatched up by one of Steven's nameless, face-shifting staff.

The rules of civility had been severely compromised.

"Takers," he said to himself, almost laughing as he pushed open the men's room door. He pulled down his pants and sat down on the toilet even though he didn't have to go. He unlocked his cell phone only to be disappointed that Meghan hadn't texted or called and it was already midnight on the east coast so she was either out with someone or in bed with someone.

Henry's chest and back jittered in little heaves. Threatened to invade his whole body. He sniffed a few times and suppressed his tears and slid his phone back in his pocket. He sat there and tried to relax. The waves of anxiety slowly waned. Men entered and left the bathroom talking about their dates and when they were going to do what and when and to whom. Henry tried not to listen.

"I can do this," he repeated.

Wiping was a formality he couldn't resist.

\*

Back at the table, Henry saw that three girls had joined them. Two other guys were standing by the table talking to Glen. They were in their early 20s and prettier than he thought anyone at the table deserved to be. More bottles appeared. More ice and mixers. Steven made room for Henry, "Here, man! Everybody, this is my bro from college, Henry!"

"HEY!"

Henry drank more. He let himself breathe and enjoy himself, trying not to take any of it seriously.

It was the first time Henry felt good, honestly good, for nearly two months. Steven put his arm around him. “Glen there,” he said, pointing, “he’s the man. They call him Haymaker. Glen *Haymaker*. Makes all the ladies say haaay.” He squeezed Henry hard.

“That was the lamest thing you have ever said!” Henry laughed. They both laughed. The girl sitting to Henry’s right moved a little closer. She reached for her drink and leaned on his leg before drawing back. He smiled at her, but not long enough to make it meaningful, and he cursed himself for being so bashful.

Below them, the crowd grew. The music seemed to thump louder. People jumped and clapped their hands in the air as if to catch the swinging beams of colored light. Haymaker stood on the table in front of them and motioned for the girl sitting next to Henry to join him. She climbed onto the table and danced with him while everyone below leaned back to remove themselves from the view of her skirt. The handcuffs double-cuffed to Haymaker’s belt loop slapped against his hip. Steven took his time leaning back, grabbing a full bottle of Grey Goose as he did. He refilled Henry’s glass.

“You do the math, bro. 600,000-plus users at \$5 a month. That’s what we did this year. Close to forty million in subscribers alone.” Steven was drunk enough to start squirming the way he did in college, as if he had perpetual ants in his pants. “That’s before ad revenue, which is nearly just as much.”

Henry leaned in to hear him better.

“Our overhead is miniscule compared to our profit. Lawyer fees do add up though, but we haven’t had any big blowups. The terms and conditions for kidnApp are vast, lemme tell you. No office rent, thankfully. We rent servers for pretty cheap. Gotta pay the staff, logistics and HR and all the Takers in different cities so that’s the most of our expenses.”

“Who the hell are they?”

“The Takers? A lot of ex-military. Some FBI and CIA. Some highly educated security contractors that don’t want to be overseas anymore. Who can blame them? Many

of them are minor or washed up actors who we've headhunted and handpicked. Hell, we've got a waiting list here in LA. C-list actors are begging to sign up. It's a steady gig. Fun too. All of our guys are extraordinarily talented. Highly educated. We're not screwing around, Henry. We're creating a *culture*."

Henry glanced up the girl's skirt dancing over them. He couldn't tell if she was intentionally giving him a good look, but it seemed like no one else in the booth could see. "Culture? Don't get ahead of yourself."

Where Steven had invented the stony look he shot him, Henry didn't know. It was a new one for the old nerd, the "brogrammer" he had watched the *Lord of the Rings* movies with. Steven continued, "We live in a consumer culture of excess. Even the poorest people, people under the poverty line, own on average, two flat-screen TVs. Once the economy corrects itself, everyone will have everything."

"Sure. I guess." Henry wasn't exactly disagreeing.

"And what do you give a person who has everything?" Steven reached forward and stroked the ankle and calf and thigh of the dancing girl.

"I'm afraid to ask," Henry forced a smile.

"You start *taking* things away. You give them the option to erase. Clear their overloaded ego."

Haymaker was eavesdropping close by. "I need my ego cleared right now." He roared and grabbed the dancing girl and ran off with her to the dance floor.

Another guy leaned down to Steven and said, "Anyone want to visit the DJ booth? More privacy there."

Steven looked at Henry and shrugged. "We're okay here for now," he answered for both of them.

The two sat in silence for a while. Propped their feet up on the table and people watched. It was as if they were back in their college apartment, sitting on the couch on a

Friday night, weighing their party options that, ten years later, they would never admit were so few. Henry refilled their glasses, and they toasted without saying anything and laughed every time they bothered to look at each other. Henry almost expected his friend to fart right there in front of him for old times sake, but the bass would have covered it along with the overwhelming cologne and perfume. No matter who knew them now, only they could see each other for who they truly were. For that, they were brothers.

Finally, Steven leaned over.

“Here’s what I’m offering. Whatever you’re making now plus twenty percent. I looked up your salary scale on the Government’s Office of Personnel website so let’s just say that makes your salary with me just over six figures. To start. And that’s negotiable.”

Henry rolled his eyes.

“Your current salary is public information for Christ’s sake. Henry, here’s where you can’t lose. I’m offering you two point five percent of the company. I don’t think you have to do that math there. Annual bonuses will push you into the next tax bracket. At the rate we’re growing, you’ll be able to retire in ten years. A *real* retirement.”

Suddenly the noise of the club seemed deafening. Henry’s sweaty hands could barely hold his glass. He couldn’t tell if this was the best or worst thing that had ever happened to him. The conservative values he cherished, every ethical and moral fiber in his body, so much of his sense of self was saying, *this is not what you should be doing with your life*. All he could say was, “I’m going to have to think about it.”

Steven didn’t seem to be listening. “I need you to be our Mid-Atlantic regional manager. You’ll oversee all hiring. You’ll manage our Mid-Atlantic office, logistics, the IT staff, all picked by us. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, dude, and I wouldn’t use that cliché-ass phrase unless it had some serious weight.”

“Steven. I’m going to have to really think about it.” Henry reasoned. “This is all really... heavy.”

Steven nodded. It was heavy.



In this economy, leaving the most secure job anyone could possibly have to work for a startup software company his college friend just created seemed like the worst move anyone could make. Henry felt blessed to have a job with a good salary and amazing benefits when so many people were out of work.

The girl that took off with Haymaker came back and returned to her seat beside Henry.

“You liking LA?” she asked.

“Yeah. From what I’ve seen. I guess.” Henry said. The girl crossed her leg, letting it graze his again.

Steven nudged Henry toward her.

“Okay, I’m curious.” Henry leaned over to Steven. “How many Waiters do you think are down there, right now?”

Steven smiled. Face close to Henry’s, he stared him straight in the eyes and smiled wide. “I am so glad you asked me that, Henry. So glad.”

Steven took out his cell phone and opened an app. “This is the admin app for kidnApp. You’ll get the same one once you’re hired.”

“*If,*” Henry corrected.

“If you’re hired, you’ll have this.” The app pulled up a map of their current location, already zoomed in to the club. Two blips appeared. “Here’s the two people waiting to be taken right now.” He clicked on their beacons, opening windows that displayed their profiles. Another button highlighted a different color of a dozen more blips. “Here’s all the people in the club with the app that haven’t submitted anything.”

“Holy shit.”

The girl leaned in.

“One of them is me,” she whispered to Henry.

Steven zoomed out to a map of LA. Thousands of blips appeared. He zoomed out to a map of the states. The entire map lit up like a solar system of Waiters there to be taken.

\*

By one thirty, Steven was drunk. He had never been able to really hold his liquor even though, at thirty one, he had gotten much better at it. Henry took his keys and the Amstel Light someone had given him. Erin, the girl who had sat next to him all night despite his shyness, agreed to come back to the house for an after party.

“Man, I’m three hours behind you guys. I’m zonked,” Henry told Steven.

“After party, dude. C’mon.”

\*

Driving the BMW was life changing. It made Henry’s late 90s Civic feel like a toy in comparison. Steven leaned over from the back seat repeating, “You’ll have one of your own. Company car. Company car.”

“KidnApp-mobile.” Erin said with her hand inching closer to Henry’s. Steven snorted and blew his nose and returned to making out with Erin’s friend in the back seat.

\*

The after party was more of an *eat whatever you can find in the refrigerator* party. Henry made Erin and himself a plate of sliced apples and cheese before she pulled him upstairs into one of the many guestrooms.

Henry turned off his phone.

He let whatever was happening happen and he hoped he would remember it in the morning.

## Chapter 4

Through whiskey-sleep, Dani woke up twice in the predawn black and questioned, if only for a second, if she weren't in her apartment at all. Had she been taken in a drunk haze? She looked to her large, open window leading to the ease access fire escape. They had used that route before, the Takers. They would know to use it again.

She listened for Bonnie. Heard nothing.

She closed her eyes and dreamed only fragments of dreams—nothing long enough to create a meaningful narrative. As the sunlight chiseled a hard line across her bedroom, Dani couldn't go back to sleep. She hung her arm off the bed to feel the cool concrete on the back of her wrist. The feeling she had, it wasn't quite a headache yet. Her brain felt wrapped in crumpled brown paper. Like her brain was some school lunch that had been forgotten about in a locker for a few days.

\*

James texted just after noon: *pick you up at 7?*

Instead of answering him, Dani opened more windows and took a shower and listened for someone to crawl in. Every minute or so she thought she saw movement in the corner of her eye. She and Bonnie were lucky enough to have a unit with their own bathroom, not a shared one in the hallway, and she abused the hot water as hard as she could on mornings—sometimes early afternoons—after a long night of work.

She dried off and French-pressed her coffee, walking the apartment in her towel, stepping over guitar picks and cords and splintered drumsticks, collecting half-finished beers crowned with cigarette ash, checking her phone again for updates. *Pick you up at 7?*

Dani took three aspirin, leaned over the kitchen counter, and groaned. Her answer:

*i was supposed to text you. But yes, seven is ok.*

*great! c u then,* was James's quick reply.

\*

Dani threw a book and some water into a tote bag before unhooking her bike and giving it a quick spray of WD40. She put on the same shorts as the day before. Put a new Band-Aid on her blistered heel. Making sure her phone was fully charged and on, she pocketed it and rode up Charles Street through Station North, passing new murals and fresh graffiti, passing methadone clinics and the local NPR station.

She loved the city in spring. Watching the total transformation from gray-slicked roads and unforgiving cold to cherry blossoms and green provided a perennial energy that, come February, she spiritually needed. Not that she would utter the word spiritual in reference to herself to anyone.

Turning before the university, she looked for cars, but not just aggressive drivers. Although she had put in her submission, in the special requests field: *Do not take me on my bike. My bike is my life. I cannot lose it,* she constantly feared her Taker—trailing her

in a car or not—might somehow overlook that important detail, snatch her up, and leave her only mode of transportation spinning in the street. That likelihood was slim. Takers were completely professional.

Her safe word repeated in her head: *merchandise, merchandise, merchandise.*

Thinking it was just her cell phone, it wasn't until she was almost to her destination that she realized she had her entire night's cash tips in her pocket. Not something she liked to be carrying around. Dani spent the next few hours at her favorite coffee shop, looking out the window to make sure her bike was okay, and saying "hey" to a new person about every half hour.

"You guys are playing a show next week, right?" one of her regulars from the bar asked.

"Yeah, you should come. I don't have any flyers on me, but check the website."

"Cool."

It was almost impossible to concentrate on her book. Every stranger that passed the shop, every helmeted person on a scooter or motorcycle, even the delivery guys dressed head to toe in blue, all of them were possible Takers. A skateboarder clacked by the window. She just wished Kyle would come by and take her anywhere he wanted to fucking go.

The relative safety of the coffee shop didn't exactly put her at ease. She could see the door and any incoming person from the window. But Takers were crafty. Invisible. Omnipresent.

"Is anyone sitting here?" someone behind her asked.

Dani nearly jerked out of her chair. "Holy shit, you scared me." A guy stood over her.

"Sorry about that."

\*

The few cups of coffee she drank disintegrated her headache to the fringes of her skull. She felt good. Good enough to ride north, almost into the county, to get a few things at Whole Foods.

She locked her bike and grabbed a basket and wondered why all Whole Foods smelled exactly the same—a dead flower kind of aromatic smell mixed with expensive cheese and coffee. It wasn't a good odor, just a distinct one.

*How amazing*, she thought, *would it be to get taken here*, among the privileged housewives filling their lonely afternoons, among the retired professors and pre-meds and wealthy lawyers living along the borders of the city—just far enough to be cushioned from violent crime. They had no idea how pleasantly violent her world could be, these clueless rubes filling their carts with fifteen dollar cheese wheels and two dollar apples. They were so painfully clueless.

What was most miraculous was how drastically the world changed once she submitted. What a simple thing. A submit button and a GPS tracker in her pocket. The will to surrender and wait. Every stranger became a thrilling prospect—a spy—an agent looking for the most opportune time to clasp her mouth and eyes and carry her away.

“Are you in line?” Dani asked a middle aged woman, so skinny she barely looked able to heave her bulging cart forward.

“Yes,” she said with a little sneer.

Dani looked her in the face. “Okay. Good. I'm just waiting to be kidnapped so I'll just stand here and do that.”

Rattled, the woman shivered and ignored her.

In the bakery department Dani thought she saw a man following her. She walked down the cereal aisle and around to inspect the whole grain and rye breads one more time and he was there, eyeing her again, turning away just as she caught him. *There was no way a well-dressed professional in his mid-twenties was checking out a short, tattooed punk like me*, she thought. *Was it him, the Taker?* She repeated *merchandise*,

*merchandise, merchandise* in her head as she sped past the dairy, trying not to look back at her possible pursuer.

At the prepared food counter, the well-dressed man was nowhere in sight. Neither at the checkout or parking lot. Dani unlocked her bike and took her time getting on. She rode around the lot and hid between two parked cars with a clear view of the exit. Eating an apple, she waited.

People sat outside the Starbucks reading newspapers with dogs tied to chair legs. A dude with massive, bobbing dreads pushed a train of shopping carts back to the entrance. Dani kept a clear head. She looked around to make sure this Taker hadn't exited out the back to flank her. When the well-dressed man finally exited, he walked straight to his car without looking suspicious, packed his groceries, and drove off. Dani followed.

\*

Keeping a safe distance, Dani tailed him over the bridge headed south, stopping once at a light until he turned up a hill and sped fast enough to lose her.

Dani stopped in the middle of the street. "Sneaky, sneaky," she said, squinting at his fading taillights. "I bet that was you."

Just then a car honked at her to move.

She nearly shit her shorts.

\*

Dani took her time riding back to the warehouse. She looked in the window of a bookshop to see if her friend was working, but she wasn't there and then stopped at a restaurant and drank a beer with a bartender who frequented her work. The taxidermied head of a buffalo overlooked the bar—antlers grew out of the wall over the liquor bottles like boney claws. They watched someone play pinball. She tipped the bartender more than she should, but that was how it was done. All the free beer in the world probably cost her just as much or more with all her generous gratuity thrown in.

“Take a shot, too,” the bartender said. “Whiskey?”

“Yes’m,” Dani grinned.

It was past six by the time she reached home, sweat-coated and starving. If James was going to take her out to a nice place then she was going to wait and eat there, no need to snack at the house. Bonnie was home. She was hunched at her laptop editing a video, the sound plugged in through the stereo, repeating the same five seconds over and over until it was spliced correctly.

“Crazy night?” Dani asked.

“Eh,” Bonnie said, not her usual talkative self.

Dani changed her shirt and rolled on deodorant, but forgot to take her tip money out and stash it somewhere safe. Bonnie finally yelled over to her, “Looks like *you* might have.”

Dani walked out of her bedroom. “What do you mean?”

“Someone told me you submitted last night.”

“Who the hell told you that?”

“Someone at the party. They saw it on kidnApp.” Bonnie never looked up from her screen. Now a different scene repeated—bent and squealing digital bleeps ricocheting off the concrete walls. “I don’t like you doing that, Danielle. And I hate that it happens here, that they come *here*.” These didn’t feel like Bonnie’s words exactly. It was as if she’d heard someone at the party express the thought, and she was, rather uncharacteristically, taking ownership of it now.

“Sorry you found out like that,” Dani said.

“Then don’t have your profile so public.” Bonnie scowled at the screen.  
“Everyone doesn’t have to know.”



Dani mimicked Bonnie's shitty scowl when she wasn't looking. She wasn't going to tell her about her date with James because that would devalue her growing affection towards Kyle—the person she would throw her bike into the harbor for if he agreed to take her out to dinner. On her way to the kitchen, Dani picked up an empty beer can and tossed it over her shoulder, not caring where it landed and took a swig of whiskey. She almost wished she smoked.

“Well,” Dani said, “can you leave the windows open for when I get home? I haven't been taken yet! I'm standing right here, for Pete's sake.”

Bonnie waved her finger in the air. Her typical dismissive sign for *sure*.

\*

Dani waited for James outside. No unfamiliar cars were parked on the block. No one seemed to be watching her. The coast was clear.

James pulled up a few minutes before seven in his old Dodge Dart, an early, boxy model with tweed bench seats that he kept immaculately clean. Dani had to admit she liked the car. If she was going to ride around town in anything, it might as well be this vintage grandpa mobile. The only thing James had modified was the stereo. Although it still looked slightly vintage, it accepted an iPod.

As he pulled up, Dani could hear the music he had obviously picked for her.

“Hope I'm not too early,” he said.

“Nope.”

\*

One of the most exciting things about Waiting was how it made every normal act of Dani's day dangerous and new. She loved the fact that she had to continue on with her life—going to work, going on dates, eating out and drinking out—all of it had to be done with the impending sense that she could be taken at any time.

She and James had little to say about anything but music and even that topic exhausted itself before they got to the restaurant. James seemed to know every detail about every band, but didn't ask her about her opinion or if she thought whichever band happened to sound too much like another or if it mattered. If he had asked her one question about *her* band, it might have made up for his self-indulgence. As he drove, he kept checking his hair in the rearview. His free hand patted his thigh with the music and diddled the keys dangling from the ignition when the beat disinterested him.

The shocks of his Dodge squeaked like an old spring mattress as they lurched over the light rail tracks and headed through the redeveloped warehouses along the perimeter of Hampden. Distressed brick and reclaimed wood had been preserved for upper middle class professionals. Dani stuck her head out the window to see people taking advantage of the end of happy hour by the condo pool and fire pit and hot tub. It was good cover for making sure no one was tailing them. If a Taker were here, he or she was looking for someone else.

“You eat here before?” James asked.

“Drinks at the bar. That's all.”

“Cool,” he said, slapping his thigh. Dani wasn't sure what was cool about it, but cool was okay. It was getting more and more obvious that James thought that she was cooler than she wanted him to think.

They parked far enough away from the restaurant to let them both know the place was probably overbooked. They walked without saying much other than pointing out the cookie cutter facades of new row houses.

“You have a reservation, right?” Dani asked as they reached the restaurant entrance.

“I didn't think about that,” James said.

Every seat was taken. The bar was two rows deep as customers waited for tables to open. Reclaimed pine and industrial fixtures dominated the decor. Delicately printed

plaid cloth napkins set at tables with wooden boards of meats and oysters being shared between plates. Jars of pickled beets, cucumbers, watermelon and cabbage lined the walls next to liquor shelves coated in a lovely, molten patina. Dani let herself fall in love with the place the second she'd seen it. It helped that a few of her friends worked here.

Dani looked down at her dirty shorts and sockless flats and wished she had worn something a little nicer. If only he'd told her where they were going.

James stood with his hands in his air-tight jeans pockets, looking around like someone had just broken a mason jar over his head. Dani took the initiative to ask the hostess, "Is there a two-top open anytime soon? Sorry."

"Not until about nine, maybe nine thirty. You can try your luck at the bar."

"Okay. Thank you."

Back to James she said, "Try somewhere else?"

"Maybe a spot at the bar will open."

Dani nodded.

She spent the rest of her time standing there trying to engage the slammed bartenders. They feverishly mixed and muddled the most complicated cocktails she'd ever seen, dropping Rubik's cube-sized squares of ice into glasses and blow torching sprigs of Christmas tree-like garnishes. They smelled wonderful.

Every few minutes she happened to be in someone's way. "Excuse me. Sorry," and "Oops." were all she said as James made small talk about the menu they hadn't seen yet.

"Deviled eggs look awesome," and "Oh, that looks awesome," were the highlights of his observations, though Dani had the feeling they'd never get to taste the *awesome* food. The thought made her weak. After twenty five minutes, one stool opened up and James insisted she take it to secure their spot at the bar.

They ordered cocktails and waited for another stool to open. After an hour of standing, James finally sat and ordered appetizers.

“I’m, ah,” he said, looking up and down the single sheet menu, “going to stick to small plates.”

“That’s cool,” Dani said. “I’m vegetarian.”

“Oh.” James looked down, adding to his inadvertent condescension. “I was thinking we could share.”

“We still can,” Dani said, “You don’t have to suck on pig cheeks.” James tightened his lips as if his nods might pound down the words he knew he shouldn’t speak. After a few minutes they agreed on a few items to share and ordered another round.

By now they had been there long enough for Dani to feel secure in her anxiousness. If a Taker was tailing her, he would have had enough time to survey the grounds, study her habits, wait for her to excuse herself to the restroom or out for a cigarette and then, as if picking up a tired pet, nab her and secure an easy getaway. She watched the two doors and the emergency exit that was directly behind her, trying not to turn around too often.

“You okay?” James asked.

“I have to go to the restroom, real quick,” she said.

\*

Dani kept the door unlocked as she peed. She watched the frozen doorknob like a birdwatcher, fixated. She sat and prayed some Taker would snatch her up from this miserable date and carry her off, blind and kicking, laughing at the powerlessness of her own will. She listened to the foot traffic outside in the hallway. She flushed. The door never moved.

She washed her hands for longer than she felt necessary and lingered by the door as people entered and exited, all of them making her feel underdressed and sad. Overall just sad. This was a world she wanted no part of.

When she returned to her stool, their food had arrived. James had a fresh beer and an empty shot glass. They ate while talking more about music and bands and what clubs sucked and which ones didn't, but James only asked her when her band was playing next—nodding to her answer—nothing more. She couldn't tell if this dismissive thing was part of his fabricated allure or if he actually didn't give a shit about her. She watched him take the last bite of nearly everything they were sharing—the last deviled egg and crust of flatbread, leaving a few limp rags of Swiss chard for her to prod.

“Great food,” she said.

“Awesome. I love this place.” James smiled and stared at her the same way he always did, a long sort of dumbfounded face as if he were looking at a race of people he had never quite encountered before. Maybe it was the challenge of her that he struggled with. *Had everyone else he pursued in life actually made him work for it*, Dani thought. *Had he ever chased anyone?*

Dani chose another drink from the cocktail list, something with the most expensive bourbon on the shelf. She watched the handsome bartender shake her drink into a martini glass, wishing he were the Taker and was sizing her up all along. Just to make James jealous, Dani took a sip and told the bartender how much she really, really loved the drink. “This is perfect. You should come down to the club I work at and show me how to make this.”

“Maybe,” the bartender laughed, too busy to chat.

“Are you sure it's vegetarian?” James snickered.

Dani stared at him and suctioned up the entire cocktail through her straw as the thin plastic tube crackled in search for liquid.

“Jesus,” James said.

\*

When the bill came, James opened his ratty leather wallet and removed a ten and twenty. He fished around for more as if he'd just found the wallet on the ground and was hoping it contained more money. He turned to Dani and asked, "Can we go halves?"

Dani held up the bill. It was almost a hundred dollars. "You can't even cover half. Do you have a card?" she asked.

"I do, but it'll overdraw my account. This is all I really have."

If only someone had opened that bathroom door. The slow turn of the handle. The ski mask appearing like black death. His approach as calculated as a paramedic as he lifted her up and out of the restaurant, her arms around him, gripping his back, holding tight like she never wanted to return to her real life of post-college idling.

Dani held the thin thermal paper receipt. The same guy that stiffed her on dollar tips couldn't afford to pay for their first date. From her cutoff jeans pocket, she pulled out her knot of twenties.

"Dang," James said.

"You owe me."

"Okay."

"This is my fucking rent money."

\*

Walking to the car, James bumped her hand twice. Dani wanted to grab one of his fingers and bend it backwards. He asked if she wanted to get another drink, but Dani reminded him that he was broke. "We can go to a place where they know me. We won't have to pay."

"I don't like the idea," Dani said.

"Of not paying or getting a drink with me?"

“I’ve got band practice tomorrow, early, so I can’t drink a whole lot tonight,” she lied. It wasn’t tomorrow, it was Monday. And practice at noon on Monday wasn’t necessarily early.

“Yeah,” James agreed. Maybe he bought her lie.

\*

James parked outside her building. The last fumes of sunset lit the horizon. Dani stared off, not caring that James had turned off the car in an effort to walk her to her door.

“Oh, I’m good,” Dani said. It was the only thing she could think of to defend herself from a kiss.

“You are good,” James smiled. “You look so good right now.”

This surprised her. It was the first mention of her he had made all evening. He leaned over the bench seat and put a hand on her thigh. Dani had no idea why she kissed him back. It didn’t feel right or good or natural, it just filled her chest with a feeling of affection—just enough reason to not retreat right away.

James motioned to dig in closer. With both hands on his shoulders, she pushed him gently. “I need to go.”

“You serious?”

Dani’s hand was already on the door handle.

“Text me later,” she said.

“Okay,” he smiled. It was enough to satiate him for at least a few hours. “Okay.”

\*

Dani spent the rest of the night waiting.

She opened all the windows and kept the door unlocked and even propped open the main door to the warehouse. She drank whiskey out of a coffee mug. Two of her band

mates texted her and asked if she wanted to go out, but she declined. It got later and later. Bonnie ran in to get something and ran out. “There’s some party thing, but I dunno if I can bring you.”

“No biggie,” Dani said.

Feeling sorry for herself, she sat on the stoop and watched her ice dissolve into the petrol-colored liquor. After an hour, a man appeared behind her.

“Don’t turn around,” he said.

Slightly startled, Dani smiled. “Finally.” She started to turn.

The man rapped her on the head with something thick and metal and she heard it clang onto the asphalt. He picked it up. Dani doubled over. Her mug rolled away. “What the fuck?”

“Don’t fucking look at my face,” he hissed.

“You’re not supposed to do *that*.” Dani checked to see if she was bleeding. “You—”

The man lifted the pipe over his head, “Gimme all your money. NOW.” He was looking around, jittery and high. Dani did see his face for a second.

“Fuck,” Dani said.

She would have run if he were unarmed. She would have side-kicked his shin and stripped enough skin off it to resemble all the chicken bones in the street. She would have screamed for a neighbor, called for all one hundred something of them, but she was frozen with fear—that pipe, just feet from her ringing skull.

Dani dug out her wad of cash. The man grabbed it and ran.



## Chapter 5

Henry woke up with the girl from the night club draped over his naked body. To his astonishment, she was naked too. This was okay. This was how college Henry had wanted to be, and that identity had been decommissioned and stuffed away for quite a long time now.

Henry slid out from under Erin and got dressed. In the bathroom, he drank two large glasses of water. Looking back at the sleeping girl in his temporary bed, he could not think of a single thing he had done to compile the complicated ingredients to create an even mediocre one-night-stand. Even if someone laid the ingredients out in front of him, the chemistry was baffling. To him one-night-stands were just college lore, maybe a myth. Nothing more.

Henry grabbed his phone and ducked into an empty bedroom, making sure no one else was awake. No text or call from Meghan. He sniffed and rubbed crust from the corner of his eye and called her. The phone rang until it went to voicemail.

“Hey Meghan. It’s Henry. I’m uh... still in LA visiting Steven. Uh, crazy setup he’s got here. Anyway, I would really love to get maybe a coffee with you next week. I think we should talk. There’s just so much... I dunno. We should talk. Sorry about the text the other day. Okay. Bye.”

What that was supposed to solve, he had no idea.

Walking out to the hallway, Steven was standing with the girl he had taken home, both of them wrapped in blankets.

“Breakfast?” he smiled.

\*

Steven spent the weekend showing him the details of kidnApp, but only between amazing meals and a deep sea fishing excursion. Haymaker made an effort to talk to him a bit about how amazing their new lifestyle was, all the while circling the cold metal of the handcuffs linked to his belt loop.

Henry checked for Meghan on his phone so often that Steven asked him if he was a Waiter now, too. “You waitin’ to get taken up, dude? Seriously.”

\*

Henry’s plane departed way later than he was comfortable with. Steven drove them to the airport, thumping the stereo with the top down.

“You know tomorrow’s a workday for me. I land at midnight eastern time.”

“Your workday starts with us tomorrow, Henny.”

Henry shook his head. “Even if I were to take the offer, and that’s a big if, I’ll have to work both jobs for a while to cover my mortgage. I’ve got student loans. A car payment. Do you know how much all that adds up to?”

“Yes, I do.” Steven was emphatic enough to make Henry think he had done that research too.

“I’ve got to think about all this,” Henry said.

He watched downtown LA zoom by. The past forty eight hours seemed like some movie dream sequence that he fast forwarded through and was now just returning to rewatch in slow motion.

“Henry, you’re the one guy I can trust between New York and Atlanta. And the only guy I want to offer this opportunity to. I want you part of this family.” Steven turned down the stereo. “And I’m using the word family because I really don’t have a real one. Just this one that I’ve built.”

Henry forced a smile. “You’re my bro.”

“Ditto.”

\*

Sleeping on the way back to Baltimore was impossible. So was thinking about anything other than the six figure salary, the bonuses, and whatever other perks came with the job. Retiring in ten years? Henry could play it conservative and do it in less time.

He sat in what he was convinced was the same first class seat on the same airplane, wearing his work clothes from Friday. The flight was long. The only way to pass the time was to drink as many complimentary light beers as he could, having to excuse himself every 45 minutes for the rest room. They landed in darkness.

The shuttle took forever to pick him up. Even longer to find his spot out in the tundra of parked cars. It was four in the morning when he finally climbed onto his couch to sleep. But not before he sent one last text.

Henry unlocked his phone, opened Steven's contact, and typed: *Yes*.