



**I WILL
KILL YOU**

**HALO
SCOT**

Cleanup on Wall Street

Alex

Corporate America: a psychopath's wet dream. Land of the free (if you're rich), home of the brave (if you're poor). A melting pot of dream corpses. Sour milk and bloody honey. Creepy Uncle Sam, your mother's brother who asks to see your tits at parties. Yankee Dingleberry. The big, bad, bold US of A. You can do everything as long as it changes nothing. Such opportunity. Such ennui. So many lost souls willing to pay *anything* to find themselves again. It's my civic duty to help them. How could I turn them away? You got a problem; I got a fix. Sure, it might cost a literal arm and leg, but I'll clean your conscience with my own, dirty my heart so yours shines (fool's) gold.

What would you pay for peace of mind? What is the price to erase regret? Lucky for you, I got an app for that: *No Questions Asked, NQA* for short (click the money icon to see current deals). It's an easy, user-friendly way to throw dollars at troubles (don't

miss Two-for-One Tuesdays). I prey on their desperation; they leech off my generosity. And there is *so* much desperation. Thank God for New York. No, thank Satan. I am the City That Never Sleeps, and I've poisoned the Big Apple. We're late for my ten o'clock, though, so keep up, and watch out for dog shit. Yup, that shit there, the one you stomped. At least now you smell like freedom.

"*Ciao, Tony,*" the receptionist calls as we enter the building—come along.

My name's not Tony, but people like when I'm Tony, so today, I'm Tony. Tomorrow, I'll be Vinny, Joey, Louie, Frankie, or another name softened with a conniving long "e." Frank is a dick, but Frankie is your friend—a friend you owe money and *antipasto* and a get-well-soon card for his *nonna*, but a friend the same. And I don't speak Italian, despite my embezzled accent, but I *am* half Italian, half Egyptian. There's the lonely truth in the lie stack, and it's best to breed lies from rotten truth, but enough blabbering. We're late, my client's early, and I doubt you got the chops for fancy talking.

"Nice to meet you, Pete," I say, sitting across the table. My client looks ready to shit himself, if he hasn't already. In his NQA request, he listed "body cleanup," blunt and bland with no euphemism or code word—a newbie classic. I don't usually take on newbies, but finances are tight as a CEO's overbite, so newbies we must.

"Tony, hi," Pete says. He sweats through his collared shirt, dank with pit stains and stomach-roll prints. I should pity him, but you know I don't, and *he's* the one who killed some guy, not me. Well, not this guy. But cross me, betray me, fuck me over, stab me in the back, and I will kill you, too.

Pete stares. I wait. Can't ask questions—part of NQA's holy

“Terms and Conditions”—so I let him come to me. He doesn’t.

“Pete, you’re new, I get it, but you gotta give me something, buddy,” I say. “And I can’t ask questions, so spill.”

Pete swallows and eyes the ceiling, hoping God will answer his prayers. But Pete doesn’t believe in God, and God doesn’t believe in him, so the room remains silent and awkward.

“There’s a body on Wall Street,” Pete whispers. “Near the subway station. I stuffed it behind a fence.”

“Behind a fence,” I repeat.

He nods.

“Behind a see-through, public fence,” I say.

Another nod.

I shake my head and *tsk-tsk* the poor dickhead. “Petie, Petie, Petie—”

“It’s Pete,” he says.

“It’ll be Greg soon if you can’t get your shit together.”

“I didn’t mean to kill—”

I raise a hand, and he stops. “I don’t care, and I don’t want to know. Plausible deniability, and all that jazz.” My lawyers are still up my ass about the last gig. Wasn’t my fault NYPD had a retirement party the same night. I buy most cops, but not all and not those. Then again, Rockefeller Center is a poor choice for slaughter—too much visibility and too many tourists. I should run a webinar on responsible murder...

“Here.” Pete hands me a slip of paper. “GPS coordinates.”

You gotta be shittin’ me. Newbie, indeed. “You wrote it down. *Wow*. If someone finds this, you’re dead or in jail wishing you were dead. Petie, buddy—”

“It’s Pete.”

“Soon-to-be Greg, fuck up again, and you’ll be asking for papers, not cleanup. If you like living in Manhattan, lie low for

a few days. I'll sort this out, but do nothing else stupid."

"Thank you, Tony," Pete breathes with relief. "I owe you one."

"Nope, you owe me \$5,239.91," I say, "payable by bank check only. Mail it to the PO box in the FAQs. If I get it within the week, all's good. If I don't, the front page of *The New York Times* might look familiar."

"Got it."

"Good."

Pete lifts his hand to shake, but I'm already out the door. He's a shit client, but he's got one thing going for him. He didn't mention my scar.

* * *

Ever been to New York? The city, I mean, or "The City," if you worship her. I don't. You shouldn't, either.

It's a city of contradictions: standoffish but sympathetic, distant but diplomatic, preppy but polite, cold but kind. A smile earns you a frown. A nod earns you a shake. Eye contact earns you first spot on the weird list, and small talk is grounds for arrest. Great place to live—for criminals, that is. The American West is too flashy (they notice every smudge in the swank), and the South is too friendly (hard to dump a body where everyone knows your name), but the Northeast is prime for crime (go ahead, cringe—I did).

And I do love crime. Why? Society is curated. You see what they want you to see, and like what they want you to like. Safety nets and security blankets soften our country. Everything is so fucking *fake*. Except fear. And death. Therein lies reality, the primal beast who trades "please" and "thanks" for knives and bullets, for truth and revenge, and truth is a bloody thing. We're

mad in Manhattan—let's make that *Madhattan*, aka Flotsam City, and I am *Batmad*...or maybe *Batmad* in *Madhattan* just has a sinus infection.

Fuck, I'm preachy today. Pete, aka Petie, aka soon-to-be Greg, made me so. I hate incompetence, and he's the king. I also hate the heat, the gritty sweat, the shadowless sidewalks, and the half-dead commuters pining for sharp-dressed, alcohol-soaked nights.

But it's not night. It's day. And it's hot. Every step unsticks my balls from my thighs, despite my silk briefs. (Don't judge. Georgina gave them to me for Christmas, and you don't question Georgina. You'll meet her soon.)

We got a long walk to Wall Street, though, so we should do a mirror scene, stuck inside my head as you are. How did you get there, by the way? I didn't invite you here, yet here you are. Did Halo send you? Can't trust Scot. Before you know it, you'll fall in love with a monster.

Ah, here's a grimy, fingerprint-greased, sketchy-ad-stickered window for us to use. The reflection is dull, but I'll fill in the edges. At thirty-four years old, I'm tall, dark, and handsome. Well, I'm tall and dark. Handsome is subjective, but no one's told me otherwise. What? Truth isn't arrogance. Aren't we all about empowerment in this day and age? Or does that only apply to celebrity sob stories and politicians' kids? Here, I'll lose half of you, and the half who stays should consider therapy.

Anyway, I'm tall (but not towering), dark (sometimes sultry), and possibly (definitely) handsome, which helps in the horny, nepotism-drenched, business climate. With olive skin, dark brown curls, and gray-green eyes, I stand out in a room but blend into the crowd. I'm lean but not cut, just your average, approachable, everyday man with street-corner charm, a secret-

lined smile, and a slight New York accent buffed by Wall Street shine. A white, button-down shirt and charcoal khakis uniform me in the army of the streets: cuffs rolled up, black pea coat draped over my broad-but-not-erotica-broad shoulders. Some would say I'm dashing. Others would call me a douche. Both are preferable to the truth.

That's the part you see: the self-made businessman out for a late-lunch stroll in the City That Never Sleeps. You scoff at his concerns and envy his swagger, but you'd spread your legs in a heartbeat and beg him to bend you over a counter. I straddle intimidating and welcoming—and your thighs, upon request. No, I'm not perfect. Yes, I smoke and drink too much. But this is NYC; the air quality will kill you fastest.

People trust me. People *want* me. I sharpen charisma and channel mania into drive. He's a handsome fuck, this Tony, sometimes Vinny, sometimes Joey, Louie, or Frankie. But Alex? Who is he?

Here's the part you don't see: knives in one pocket, cigarettes in the other, liquor coupons shoved in my coat. Insomnia-ringed eyes, brow-to-cheekbone scar, voice hoarse from crying myself to sleep. Arm and torso tattoos of Italian and Arabic poems reflect a damaged, softer side, and my thousand-yard stare sees too much and cares too little. All are constant reminders of an unhealable wound. To give my kids a normal, happy, stable life (yes, I hear your surprise at my procreation), I embrace psychopathy...after I lost her.

Shit, that got dark. We're supposed to have fun this book. Let's rewind.

Hello, Reader. I'll call you Bob. Nice to meet you, Bob, though I'm sure you'll regret me by the end. I'm Alex, or Alessandro Osman. My parents got trigger-happy with my first name, but it

could have been worse. Ma (Italian) and Mom (Egyptian) fought over shoving all our ancestors on my birth certificate, but the hospital (bless them) vetoed their preferred name: Alessandro Giacomo Domenico Mido Karim Ayad Osman. My six siblings were less lucky, but being the youngest has perks. In the end, Ma gave my first name, Mom gave my last, and they left out the middle to avoid divorce.

Despite my country-sized family, I'm a lone wolf, Red Riding Hood's crush with *American Psycho* aspirations. Less *Goodfellas*, more *Ocean's Eleven*. Knives over guns, cunning over chaos. I will kill you, but only as a last resort, though I've had a surprising number of last resorts. Sure, I maim at will, but kill too soon, and you lose your advantage. Fear is a powerful motivator, and the dead don't fear. I'm not a genius, but I *am* ingenious, and that's how I survive.

We've reached Wall Street, and clouds threaten a storm. Since summer, every afternoon, the sky rains liquid shits. It's the hottest heatwave on record, the most dogged of dog days. Between swamp-level humidity and wet-fart asphalt, it's a miracle anyone's out at all. New Yorkers hate rules, so we'll sweat through our clothes and pass out from heat exhaustion before we admit it's too hot. But it *is* too hot, and Pete is too stupid, and this day is a diarrhetic diaper overflowing with regret.

As promised, the bloated corpse waits at Pete's GPS coordinates (stupid as Cupid, that one). At least the murder weapon still hides in the corpse's chest. Bless New York's high weirdness threshold. No one's reported it yet. They think it's a papier-mâché art installation for a college student's thesis.

I burn Pete's paper and call it in. The phone rings, beeps twice, and I say, "Wolves cry hunger: Wall Street Station." Then

I hang up. Unlike Pete's paper, this is an encrypted line. The company motto opens the high-risk extension number, then logs the location. Cleaners will arrive in minutes, so I leave and wander toward white-collar hell.

Good job, Bob. You did all right. A little squeamish at the corpse, but you'll adapt. Don't worry, less of this in the future, more gory fun. I rarely do street work anymore, only when the situation is delicate—meaning Pete is an idiot. We both agree on that, even if you're pissed you ended up here, in my fucked-up head, in my messed-up life. Careful, though. You'll relate to me yet.

White-Collar Hell

Alex

Welcome to Rockefeller Center, declared a New York City Landmark in 1985, and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1987. Prestigious and crowded, affluent yet artsy, it's the perfect place to run a criminal empire, hiding right in the bleeding heart of America. Okay, more like America's moist, hairy armpit.

Stop a second, and breathe in that beautiful, industrial, stars-and-stripes pollution. Feel free and powerful yet? Before you can answer, rain starts and thunder roars, saving you from awkward indecision. No time to gawk at tourists, food trucks, or vendors selling cheap, gaudy, plastic shit. I cross to my office building and nod at the doorman, then pass below the behemoth sign that proclaims my legacy in blood-red print: Apex. It's pretentious, but so am I, and I built this kingdom from scratch, so I deserve some masturbatory decor.

Bob, stop it. You're judging me. That's not nice. What is it

now? Crime or arrogance or the sign's font? It's crime? Ah, I see. Despite multiple economic depressions—sorry, “recessions,” because God forbid we panic—I'm supposed to attend college, get a degree that means shit, drown in student debt, and turn out underappreciated, undervalued, and under-everything? No. That ain't how I work.

What about scholarships? So glad you asked, Bob. Yes, what about scholarships I couldn't win because my parents couldn't afford high-rent areas with pricey private schools and showy extracurriculars? But it's *my* fault, right? Of course it is. I'm no poster child, so I'm labeled the problem child, ushered into shadows while some palatable kid with the same socioeconomic crutches but a better attitude takes center stage.

Oh, no, no, no, I'm not bitter, Bob. It all worked out in the end...for the most part. You either play by the rules or make your own game, and I'm a gamemaster, a troublemaker, an all-around hell-raiser.

Back to Apex.

I bask in air-conditioned ecstasy, then ride the elevator to the top, to management offices and important cubicles, if a cubicle could ever be important. Our motto perches over every doorway: *Wolves cry hunger*. In other words, ambition is never satisfied, and desire never rests. Clever, I know. Whiskey inspired it. That, and my poisonous appetite. I'll eat myself yet, and not in the sexy, self-fellating way—which if you can do, I commend you.

The elevator opens, and my empire awaits. Sleek and modern, bigwigs' corner offices brag leather chairs and swollen desks, and a white-cubicle checkerboard nests between glass walls. Through polished windows writhes unpolished NYC: smog, traffic, sirens, newborn thunderstorm, subways belching com-

muters, taxis honking at existence, and suits power-walking to immortal meetings. We even got abstract artwork on the walls, because we're cultured, dammit.

Some of my employees work here, in the office, as the reputable financial institution we make-believe. They work on *NQA* app updates, bug fixes, and customer service, along with insurance fraud. We target rich assholes filthy with abuse lawsuits, then hack a fake name onto their life insurance policies. After waiting an unsuspecting amount of time, my other employees—the street crew—kill them in a “freak accident.” Last, my office team uses the fake name to claim insurance, then wires blood money through a network of offshore accounts.

I offer a great split of clean and dirty work, equal opportunity for every Myers–Briggs personality. As CEO, I must provide incentives for loyalty—outside death threats. I mean, you *can* leave Apex, if you'd like to shorten your lifespan. But most don't leave. Most stay till retirement, another shady area with a move-off-grid-or-die ultimatum.

Why do they stay? Thanks for asking, Bob. You're not as bad as they say. But you should ask: *Why wouldn't they stay?* I offer top-notch salaries, six-hour workdays, unlimited PTO, early dismissal on Fridays, paid health and dental insurance (family plans, too), tuition reimbursement, free childcare, gym discounts, and pensions—benefits to keep lips shut and minds open. There are also break rooms with coffee, tea, and beer, as well as beanbags and TVs, plus annual company retreats to places like Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, Singapore, Germany, and Belize—notice a pattern? You should. Gotta check on that blood money.

Apex's perks erase morality. We kill, but we also have quarterly pizza parties with glittery strippers, and there's nothing

like lust to ease your conscience. The libido is a powerful tool, and we are all reptiles at the core despite our hundred-thread-count, cotton-blend button-downs. In a world where—big breath—working-class citizens struggle beneath leagues of student debt, villainous insurance plans, soaring housing costs, and festering mental health, where most work many jobs to survive with no retirement in sight, where our overeducated generation struggles with underemployment, where financial crashes crucified our futures, where we suffocate on low wages in a stagnating job environment and shit economy, where society gaslights and strangles us, where everyone tags us as lazy and entitled in a barren market, where the world blames us for upheaval and tells us to follow in our parents' footsteps despite the changing times, common decency gets you far.

That escalated.

Anyway, I'm a savior, or so they tell me. Naked glitter parties fix all problems, just saying.

Back to work. Deja (CFO), Jorge (CTO), and Li Jie (HR manager) spot me across the floor. All three are forces of nature, so we shouldn't ignore them, Bob, regardless of your antisocial request. They're Apex's zenith—beneath me, of course—all sharks in their own right. That's why I hired them. They can smell blood and make cities bleed. But they're also kind, and kindness goes a long way. No one wants to work with a twat. Or a dick. Or a prick. Or any fucking genital. I hired the best, and I give the best freedom to work.

"Mr. Osman," Jorge greets. My employees call me Mr. Osman, and I call them their given names—rank, status, and appearance bullshit. (Bob, get back in your cage.)

"Thank God you're here," Deja says.

We thank God too often. Satan deserves the real respect.

He's responsible for all we do at Apex, if you believe. (Mom is Muslim, and Ma is Catholic, so they gave me a diverse religious upbringing.)

"Morale is down," Li Jie says. "Way down. After last month's buyout, everyone's worried about layoffs."

Last month, to pay the bills, I sold extra shares to our stockholders. Because everyone's dramatic, they called it a buyout, but I still own the vast majority of Apex.

"There will be no layoffs," I say, leaning against a cubicle. The resident employee glares up, notices me, then blushes and winks. I fucked him...maybe...after the buyout? That night was hazy.

"We know that," Deja says, "but *they* need reassurance." She motions toward the cubicle garden.

"You want a speech."

The bigwig trinity nods.

I sigh. "Gather VPs, managers, and supervisors—hell, get everyone, and bring them to the cafeteria."

* * *

Hungry, Bob? Grab a snack from the vending machine, then meet me by the stage.

This wasn't my afternoon plan, by the way. I'd hoped to doze in meetings, sign important papers, and nod or shake my head in vague approval or disapproval, in case my decision bites me in a week. Ambiguity has saved my ass more than once.

Moving on. You got your snack, I got my mic, so let's do this. Yes, I agree, the cafeteria is obnoxious. A three-story stadium with massive windows is excessive, but I have many employees, and they all need to eat. There's plenty of seating,

rows of tables with benches, and every imaginable food and drink. Calm down, Bob. I know *you* know, but *they* don't know, so deal with exposition now and then.

Let's start. Storm paints the glass, thunder rattles the building, and lightning strobes the room—perfect for a pep talk. I take the stage. You should, too. Wait, you don't have a choice. You're stuck in my head, just like me.

"Fuck, it's hot," I say into the mic and earn chuckles all around. Shut up, Bob. Weather is the universal mediator, and profanity earns street cred. *See? He's like us.* We both know that's false, but let them pretend they can reach my heights—or depths.

"It's been a tough month," I continue. "For that, I apologize." From the sidelines, Deja, Jorge, and Li Jie urge me on. "Several of you have expressed concern about the buyout." *Expressed* concern? *Expressed* is forever tied to lactation for me. Grow a few kids, and every word shifts meaning. "But there's no reason to worry. There will be no layoffs, and salaries will increase by five percent over the summer." There are cheers...and relief. Money calms all fires, but we're not out of the woods yet. Best add some punch and pizzazz.

I start sucking: "You all deserve this. *Never* underestimate your worth. It's easy to doubt yourselves, but I never doubt you." Boost them so they ignore the shitstorm. Embrace the mania, Bob. It works.

"The older I get, the fewer fucks I give," I say. "Hoard those fucks. Don't let anyone take them away."

My employees cheer.

"You can do it. Chokeslam distrust. Punch doubt in the teeth. Hit insecurity in the throat. Elbow uncertainty in the gut."

They cheer louder.

"Slaughter negative voices. Bodycheck impostor syndrome.

Roundhouse-kick reservation. Slap hesitation in the face with a wet fish wrapped in an oily turd. Burn self-hatred in a bonfire, and toast marshmallows in the dying embers of its oozing carcass.”

They cheer their souls free, unleashed by lunacy.

“Conquer each workday. Autopsy your soul. Bare your truth, and smash a motherfucking gong.”

Note to self: Buy a motherfucking gong.

“Measure life with kindness, not money. Be kind to others, and be kind to yourself. Eviscerate this company with kindness.”

They go as crazy as I am, and I wallow in their praise. Ambiguity yields high ROI, and profits will soon jump on the validation-horny train.

“You are worthy. You deserve the stars. Believe in miracles, because you are a miracle. Let’s carry Apex into the future atop a blazing mountain of glory.”

When you give the speech that makes you question your sanity...again...for the hundredth time...

Okay, at this point, I should embrace my insanity.

Anyone else burned out? My skull is a vat of charred chicken livers blended with brain pudding. But that’s normal for me.

Great work, Bob. You were skeptical at first, but I knew you’d join in. Morale’s up, so time for a smoke break, then the dreaded meetings and paperwork. It’s hard to be me, but it’s harder to be you, shoved between neurons as you are. Let’s press on through the cosmic, septic sludge. If we’re lucky, we’ll exit this book in one piece, though you never know with Halo, the bloodthirsty savage.

My Tears Are Dry

Erin

Dear Sandy,
I know you hate that nickname, but Alex is the world's man, while Sandy is my man, and you will always be my man, be mine.

By the time you read this, I will be gone. I won't lie, these years together haven't been easy, but they've been true, and this is my last chance to thank you. So thank you for loving me, for protecting me, for working two jobs to support our beautiful family. I couldn't be prouder of how far you've come. I was the rock, and you were the fire, and together, we made what should be forever.

But it's not, and that's okay. I know you disagree, but it's okay, Sandy, and it's okay to cry. Let yourself feel. Let yourself heal. Let yourself live again. This is my end, but it is not yours. I hope you find a new love, a better love. I hope you let me go. I hope the world is gentle, that the children give you strength. I hope you see my smile in every mirror but find new windows to explore.

MY TEARS ARE DRY

I'll send as many of these as I can, but I'm fading, love, and I want you to move on. Move on for me. Live for me. Find someone new, and love them more than you loved me. Ignite the city with your beauty, Sandy. You have so much more to give.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Bourbon Blitz

Alex

The letters started a day after she passed, as if *she* chose her fate instead of a curse. Delivered at random intervals to Apex, a company started during the despair of her diagnosis, I both yearn and dread their arrival.

Erin must have told the post office to deliver them posthumously according to a pattern only she could see. That's how she was, seeing patterns in people everyone else ignored. She saw something in me and told me so, but I never realized my potential till she was gone.

Sorry, Bob. I warned you, didn't I? Can't trust Scot, and can't trust me.

But her latest letter burns: *I hope you let me go.* Erin was wise as the stars, but she never understood how much I loved her, wanted her, cherished her, *needed* her. She was my soulmate, my second half and better half, the half of my heart that made me whole. I'm not whole anymore. Everything inside me is

broken, Bob, and I'm inches from collapse.

This is my end, but it is not yours.

It's not only her words. It's her handwriting, too, her handwriting, her perfume, her skin cells left on paper. I hear her melodic voice, see her freckly grin, grieve her burgundy hair, and mourn her river-blue eyes. She was my rock, scrawny but strong, warm but fierce, my stay-at-home warrior who made our dingy apartment a home.

I was the rock, and you were the fire, and together, we made what should be forever.

We moved after she died. Couldn't drown in memories. That's what I thought, anyway. But memories are stalkers. No matter how far you run, how much you smoke, how deep you drink, they always find you in every bar, kiss, and grin. Death of a loved one, moving, and job loss fall under "Most Stressful Life Events." In the past year, I've suffered all three.

Let yourself feel. Let yourself heal. Let yourself live again.

Live for me.

Christ, Bob, I can't do this anymore, though I've told myself that every day for the past year. And every day for the past year, I've forced myself to forget. But the storm's over, the workday's done, so let's head to my favorite watering hole.

Bar Four is not special, nor is it the fourth bar of anything. In fact, I'm surprised it's still around. It squats between Banksy's Deli and Mario's Magic Emporium, a sex shop for grad students (the toys are cheap, Bob, and you deserve better). Oil films every distressed counter, and dirt coats the floor, footprints dancing throughout. Lights flicker, stools creak, the glasses are foggy, and the bathroom reeks.

You wonder why I'm here, Bob, because we know I'm worth far more than this. I belong in a West Village tavern like

Hooley's Lounge, laughing at plebs with pursed lips, pinkie out, sipping single-malt Scotch from diamond tumblers. Instead, I'm chugging shit-brown bourbon from a plastic cup, squished between sticky men and clammy women in an end-of-the-road, washed-up shack. It's hot as blood. Air conditioning can't overcome the constant *squeak-squeak* of the door opening and closing, *opening and closing*, letting out drunks and letting in desperation, escaping the heatwave for hell.

So why do I come here? Simple answer: No one knows me here. No one expects the straight-backed, devilishly handsome (yet approachable) CEO of a Fortune 500 company to mingle with this crowd. No offense to this crowd; I was one of them last year. Then I plunged to rock bottom while Apex shot sky-high. Fuck, I wish Erin could see this. Well, not *this* exactly—she doesn't need to see that dude pissing in a corner, or that chick changing her nipple ring—but my success, *our* success.

If not for her, I'd be nothing. I was the rocket, but she was my wings, holding me steady through storms. Without her support, the rocket kept going, but I fell from the cockpit, plunged into the ocean, and drowned in the Mariana Trench.

Yes, Bob, the rocket symbolizes Apex. Keep up, or you'll fuck up my soliloquy.

Where was I? Ah, yes, soul-crushing, heart-wrenching, spirit-slaying despair. Have you ever loved someone, Bob? Wait, don't answer that. Have you ever *fallen* in love? Because everyone loves, but not all fall down. I fell, Bob. I fell *hard*, and I'll never fly again. So I do what any reasonable, responsible adult does in times of crisis: I ignore anguish and fuck a fellow empty soul.

This one's blonde. I like blondes, always have, but Erin surprised me with red. No one knows what they want or need till it slaps them in the face, and Erin sure slapped me.

Back to the blonde. Her name's Sara—or Sarai, or Sally, or Sasha—and she's seen some shit, too. There's no spark between us, no connection outside our groins. As I pound her over the slimy bathroom sink, thighs sticky with sweat and desire, tits and balls swinging like lassos, my conscience warns me to stop. To pause. To ask about her. To care about her. To do what Erin prayed in her letter: *live, let go, move on, find someone new*.

How, Bob? How can I live when I'm dead inside? How can I let go of my only lifeboat? How can I move on when there's no shore in sight? How can I find someone new when I'm someone gone? I don't exist anymore. Not since Erin died. This tunnel is endless, this pit eternal. As Sara/Sarai/Sally/Sasha and I release together in a mutual grunt, tears sting my eyes while passion fades to pain.

I pull out, slingshot the condom into the trash, and help Sara Whatever-the-Fuck back into her lacy cocktail dress. We nod at each other—awkward, understanding—and shuffle back to our respective netherworlds in the bar.

I drink too much—surprising, given the stench. Then I realize with a fuck-myself panic that it's late, I have kids, I'm supposed to do things, know things, to have my shit together, to pretend I can function when my heart's ripped out and my soul's mauled apart.

Shit. Okay, I'll behave. Or not. But I do pay, settling my tab with a black card (a credit card for rich, crazy fucks like me). I should head to my penthouse, check on Georgina and my girls. I should read to them. Sing to them. Help them brush their teeth and put on pajamas. And I do those things often, but not tonight. I'm always broken, but tonight, I'm bare.

Go on and judge, Bob, but they can't see me like this. *You* don't want to see me like this, and you're an adult. Imagine

what my five-year-old twins would think if Daddy stumbled in with alcohol breath and tobacco stains, eyes bloodshot and hair disheveled, clothes crusty with a stranger's orgasm. No. Can't go back. Not yet. Georgina will care for them; she always does. That's why I pay her, to do what Erin did, what I cannot: to sail steady.

You have so much more to give.

But I have other, lesser work that I can busy myself with now. Next on the checklist for reasonable, responsible adults: Erase hardship with hard work. Grown-ups don't fix their problems; they find other problems. And I got a pesky problem for my bourbon-blitzed mind to solve.

Lab Rat Race

Alex

Ronny Perkins is my problem.

He was a good boy who became a bad boy, a straight-laced citizen tainted with greed. He applied to Apex as sales lead for *NQA* and stayed for six months, then he wanted to “diversify his résumé.” Contrary to your opinion, Bob, I was civil and polite. When Ronny handed me his resignation, I asked how much to keep him at Apex. As the respectable, debonair CEO that I am, I offered raises, bonuses, free wine, you name it. And you know what Ronny did? The nerve of him, Bob. Go on and seethe between my brain lobes. Ronny told me to, and I quote, “Fuck off, Osman. I saw your accounts, and you’re dirty as shit.”

That hurt, Bob. I’m not legal, but I care for my people. Ronny got comfortable. He worked half as hard and took twice as much. He mooched booze and fucked my glittery strippers. Then he left when it suited him, but it didn’t suit me, and you

know what I said about leaving, about retirement, so tonight's the perfect night to avoid grief with gore. Erin called me fire, and fire consumes me since I lost her.

Hurry, Bob. We've reached the Lab, and you don't want to miss out. If you did, you'd have ditched this book at the first fucking F-bomb, but you're horny for carnage, too. Don't pretend you're above me. We're both sick-ass fucks, unzipping our flies for every violent scene. We worked all day, drank ourselves stupid, smoked ourselves free, then had our release. (I assume you got off to Sara's bouncing tits, too.) Now, it's time to play.

Remember what I told you about rich assholes? Here's another implementation of company policy. All rich people aren't assholes, of course—take me, for example. Okay, bad example, but some exist. Maybe. Anyway, this is where I go Robin Hood on society, if Robin Hood were a drunk, deranged madman.

"Mr. Osman?" Panic strangles Ronny's voice as I yank the bag off his head. Respectful now, are we? Death makes saints of us all. Ronny squints in the buttery glow of a light bulb dangling above my tool table. Strapped to a dentist chair like a low-budget porno, he drinks in his surroundings with rising terror.

We're in an abandoned warehouse in Hell's Kitchen, a warehouse I pay the city to keep abandoned. Good old New York, corrupt from birth. The building is a basic bitch with brick walls, dusty floors, and grime-smearred windows that sever outside from in. Ronny and I are in our own world here, plus the Surgeon, a nameless femme fatale with searing looks and smarts. The government exiled her, then I hired her. She ensures my Lab Rats live till I want them dead. Yes, we've fucked once or

twice, Bob, but that's not the point of this conversation.

"Mr. Osman," Ronny says again, but this time it's no question.

"Ronny," I greet the near-corpse.

Fear tortures Ronny's features. "Please, I'm sorry. I'll do anything if—"

"I let you go?"

He nods his head.

I shake my head. "No. I offered you the world, but the world wasn't good enough. You made your bed, and you shit in mine."

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry, and I'll do anything, I swear. Name it, and it's done."

"We tried that before, and you lost, so there are consequences. I don't do participation trophies." I grin while Ronny pisses himself and vomits green chunks. "But if you cooperate, this can be a quickie in every definition of the term."

"Don't fuck me."

"Don't fuck with me, and I won't."

I don't want to fuck Ronny. I've had men, loved men, but I need my men principled, not pathetic. Looking at Ronny, I'm flaccid with disgust, so I turn toward other tools.

"Scalpel, sir?" the Surgeon asks. Her lab coat strains over her ample chest—that was for you, Bob, not me. This isn't a porno, regardless of your request. I'd describe her volumized hair and dick-squeezing thighs, but now is not the time or place. She's a literal genius, so show some respect.

"Yes, please." I take the blade and twirl it between my fingers. "I need Glabella's bank account numbers, plus your own."

Glabella is Ronny's new employer, a frozen yogurt chain. Did anyone research its definition? Glabella means forehead, the smooth part between and above the eyebrows. Who the hell names their company Forehead? Fuck Glabella, and fuck frozen

yogurt. Eat ice cream, for fuck's sake. *But yogurt's healthy.* Shut up, Bob. If you smother yogurt with chocolate chips, cookie bits, hot fudge, and brownies, it's not healthy anymore, is it? Like dipping celery in caramel, or carrots in cake batter.

"You'll kill me anyway, so why tell you?" Ronny asks.

He's a dumb one, worse than Pete. "Tell me now, and I'll kill you fast," I say. "Tell me later, and I'll kill you slow. But you *will* tell me, Ronny. They all do. Learn from their mistakes."

He gulps. "They?"

"They." Yes, there were others in grungier shadows. No one starts in a torture palace. I utilized many basements before I reached the Lab's prestige.

This is Ronny's crux, his point of no return, a formative moment in this night's narrative. Will he tell me the account numbers, and I'll end it, then you'll smack your (nipple) boner back down? Or will he hold out, and we'll have fun, then we'll all go home satisfied (except for Ronny, of course)? He's weak, sure thing, but sometimes weak ones surprise me.

What would you do, Bob? Would you tell me now or make me wait? Are you a tattle or a tease? I peg you as a tease: slight masochism, BDSM tendencies, a hidden stash of whips under a trapdoor. Kidding, Bob. You're as boring as they come. Doubt you've ever licked a turd. Yep, you'd tattle in a heartbeat, but Ronny does not.

"Go to hell," Ronny says.

If I were a proper supervillain, one versed in 1980s jargon, I'd say, "I'm already in hell." But that sounds corny, and I'm far beneath hell. If we use a tamer response, something like, "One last chance," that's bloated with cliché, and I gave him many last chances. I was soft on him, too soft. So I settle for an oldie but goodie: a self-indulgent monologue.

“Ronny,” I say, “you see what you see, and you know what you know. What you see and know is I’m a successful CEO—with shady finances, same as all tycoons. But what you don’t see and know is I was like you a year ago. I was nobody, I was poor, I was desperate, so I changed, unlike you. I took life by the balls, punched fate in the face, and cogs creaked the other way. Then I lost my wife. She was everything to me, and her death took everything from me.

“When you crawled to Apex itching for glory, I gave you glory. When you resigned, I offered the universe on a silver platter, but nothing satisfied you. Know why? Because you’re broken, too. We both fill voids with superficial bullshit, but nothing will complete us. Nothing will make us whole. I have an excuse; you have only your ego. Go to hell? Never left, same as you, but I like it here.

“So, Ronny boy, the bank accounts or this gets ugly...and messy. For my late wife’s sake, I’ll give you one more chance.”

Okay, I added some ’80s spice and cliché, but I didn’t cackle or play opera or twirl my mustache, not that I have a mustache. Should I? It’s hard to rock one without pedophile vibes.

“Ronny?” I press.

Unmoved by my speech, Ronny spits at me. Well, he tries to spit at me, but he’s bound to the dentist chair, so it lands on his chest, and that gives me an idea.

“Immobilize him, but don’t numb him,” I tell the Surgeon. “I want him to feel everything.”

She injects a paralyzing agent into Ronny’s IV (some seventeen-syllable, neuromuscular-blocking agent I can never remember no matter how often we use it). Ronny jerks then stills, eyes wide as blood moons. But he can still suffer pain, and talk, and pivot his horror-stricken gaze.

How much do you want to see, Bob? Not that you have a choice, but manners consist of asking, not agreeing, so here I am asking: You want it all? Of course you do. You want it all, and you want it now. There's a savage in everyone, so enjoy.

I lower the scalpel to Ronny's trembling chest, then slice through his shirt and flesh. The Surgeon smiles. Ronny screams. Blood-curdling shrieks. Geysers of gore. This is delicious. Curling my fingers, I rip his skin till his rib cage lies bare, chalk-white bones in meaty tissue. With a bone saw, I cut the sternum and crack open his ribs, exposing his spastic heart. The organ palpitates while Ronny screeches, tears streaming down his cheeks in panic and agony.

I stroke Ronny's pulpy heart—tender, in lullaby—as blood pumps beneath my gore-painted fingers. Too slow. One hundred and twenty beats per minute—fast, but not dangerous for Ronny's youth. Best change that.

I open my hand, and the Surgeon passes me a hammer. Accompanied by saliva-gurgling sob-squeals, I smash the hammer into the heart. Ronny erupts. Howls escape his mouth as blood escapes his chest, and his pulse races toward two hundred then beyond. That's better. Constant anxiety. Constant reminders. Constant retribution for disdain and disrespect. I return the hammer to the Surgeon, then clamp Ronny's heart with my fist, squeezing rage into his butchered chest. Beneath my grasp, his heart throbs in revolt, thuds against my pulse, united in anguish.

"The bank accounts, Ronny," I whisper into his ear.

"Fuck...you," Ronny stutters between scarlet-steeped teeth.

I squeeze his heart again: screams, blood, the whole shebang. Does anyone use "shebang" anymore, Bob? You strike me as someone who would keep that dream alive, but back to the

nightmare.

“Ronny, I don’t like repeating myself,” I say, jerking off his heart.

Ronny gasps and gags on blood and drool, but he’ll give in soon. I know his type. They pretend they’re special, powerful, useful, with balls big as Kentucky and brains sharp as razors. But they castrate their ambition, their will dull as sitcoms. When push comes to shove, they welcome the fall.

Because it *hurts*, Bob, and they’ve never suffered pain before. Not real pain. Not pain like grief, like heartbreak (literally in this case). The worst they’ve experienced is a broken bone here, a minor surgery there, but not the grisly, gritty torture of life cracking you open and exposing your core.

A torture I endure every day.

Yes, Bob, it’s a metaphor. Stop nitpicking. You’re ruining my flow.

I squeeze Ronny’s heart again. Blood feathers between my fingers, under my nails, onto the floor, the *drip-drip-drip* of the Grim Reaper’s ringtone. He’s fading fast, as I knew he would, groaning nonsense and sputtering prayers. Comfort always overrides courage. Stop pain, and forget glory. Give me freedom. Give me peace.

“Make it...stop,” Ronny mumbles. “Please...make it...stop.”

“Only you can do that,” I whisper, heart in hand.

He sighs, then surrenders. “For me...routing number: 046244639...account number: 21811919. And for Glabella... routing number: 804601430...account number: 49936333.”

I nod at the Surgeon, and she verifies their validity. “Such a shame,” I tell Ronny. “You could have avoided all that pain.”

“Done,” the Surgeon says.

Perfect. Profitable. A hopeful end to a horrid night. Funds

laundered and wired to offshore accounts. I told you before that I care for my people—the loyal ones, at least. Tomorrow, *The New York Times* will boast Apex's stock boost, and employees will receive surprise bonuses. They'll accuse Glabella of insurance fraud—ironic and unfair, I know, but this is New York, not the Vatican. You're right, bad comparison.

With a last look at Ronny's piss-soiled, vomit-coated, blood-crusted body, I squeeze his heart till it bursts. *I killed a boy, and I liked it.* Death splatters the Surgeon and me, and we should go, we should stop, we should learn from our mistakes, we should grow up and move on, but we don't. Instead, we eye each other through red-misted carnage and morph into monsters, possessed by adrenaline. Lust shreds our clothes as talons claw our bodies. Using Ronny's blood as lube, we collide in rapture then release.

It's quick. It's dirty. And it's fucking heaven. After, we clean Ronny, then we clean ourselves. There's a shower in the back and extra clothes of every size. What? I don't know who will use the torture palace, and I want every sadist to feel right at home.

Don't judge, Bob. *You* barged into *my* brain. I didn't invite you, and I don't deserve your insults. Yes, a man died tonight—a limp, flaccid, disloyal man—but a whole company benefits, a company full of devoted employees with families and children, with mortgages and dreams.

Good people should win, even if bad people fight their battles, and my employees *are* good people, Bob, even if I am not. So shove your judgment up your ass, and enjoy the party. You're hard as a rock, and I know it.