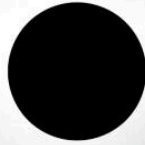


Ade Ronke

A Case in Point  
A Lila Orilede Mystery



LIKE A POCKER DOT ON A GRILL, LIFE IS AN ENIGMA

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## ZHOURECKH: THE COMEDIC ADVENTURES VOLUME I

To further incentivize the need for justice so the Bluesie-Jazz comedy festival is realized in reasonable time(necessitating a forensic audit), I am offering ZHOURECKH: THE COMEDIC ADVENTURES VOLUME I as a print only receipt book. Your support means the world to me. If you met me at the get together(because only those who care in the least with their support should criticize the other comedian, me) and you show me a verifiable \$50 and over support of the free books for life cause, this print book is yours directly from me. I intend to show love to those who show me love. This too is important to me. This book will not be made available online in ebook or print.

Your receipts mean the world, freedom and justice to me. Justice is important to me. I will not stop working hard towards achieving it. May you be blessed in more ways than I can offer for participating in my cause for justice. I am excited to write the book as much as I am about my own jokes as this differentiating x black woman. So, my work here is to write two sets of comedic acts, one of which I will personally perform. I live for love, truth, knowledge, wisdom and natural reality. Thanks for being a part of it:

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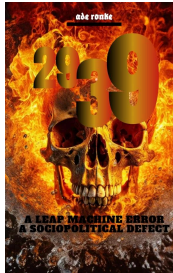
*Ade Ronke*

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*A stitch in time saves none*

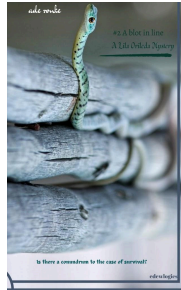
*A worthy scientist acquires the habit of knowing when to regret*

## Next year



*The unexpected preemptive leap differential machine error, the Knapse, triggers the co-embedded synaptic alarm in its designer Patrick Tinsel towards the chaos associated with it. He must correct the sociopolitical cost or enable its realizations.*

## Next in series



*Mrs. Butterfingers is Atlett's best source of gossip. As the head of the Senior Girls Association, she is almost certain of everything. She's also Lila's favorite person for conspiracy theories and gossip. She is almost certain that the KKK murdered the Nanny in the park to proclaim their superiority. Almost certain that the Union bank tech staff emptied the secured vaults of the Overlook Bank of Atlett. She is also almost certain, Trustscape, the new shadow Detective Agency, is to blame for setting fire to Lila's new corporate car in order to scare her. And life at Atlett is as Lila imagined it, as her cases pile up against all odds.*

To support the book scheduled for next year and the second in the series for A case in point, [please support the free books for life cause](#). You may choose to donate whatever you may through [lomopeju@protonmail.com](mailto:lomopeju@protonmail.com) paypal handle. And you may put your support into the love and enjoyment of music at [rillmusic on Bandcamp](#). Thank you.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

[The things that happen to stop me from becoming someone else, however painful, are amazing.](#)

If something is ultimately evil, it must necessarily and in the least pass the reasoning test. If something is duplicitous in relation to another, but that thing isn't in the primary relatively, that thing is evil. If it wasn't, then everything will be duplicitous from the primary. Like DNA, simplicity, not duplicity, is the foundation for distinct existence. Such is the case where something evil relative to another is duplicitous.

The derivations are terrible. Instead of one set of harm, there will be two. Instead of one set of lies, there will be two sets of lies. Instead of one set of theft, there will be two sets of theft. Instead of one set of murders, there will be two sets of murders. Instead of one set of rape, there will be two sets of rape. Lies, theft, murder, rape. Four sets of duplicitous evil things are happening relatively. Is this thing good or evil? Any rational, intelligent mind knows what the answer must be. There is no real relativity here. Not a rational one. Not an intelligent one. Not a scientific one. Not a natural one. There is nothing but evil masquerading as good.

That aside, in the age of AI, a different sort of duplicity confounds us. Here, we are not asking whether something is good or evil. We are asking whether the harm it imposes outweighs its potential for good. Yet, I will take this machine-relativity over the duplicitous kind who calls itself relative. I will rather follow a man-made machine to the end of the world, for life and justice, than follow a wickedly blind justice.

Not subtle in rhetoric, but loud and as spiritual prayer, as you hopefully love this book and pass it from one hand to another or directly from my site free of any charge and as a spiritual investment in kind, may my spiritual and intellectual hopes grow exponentially and accordingly if my aims are clean and just. I have worked, and I have suffered for the modest spiritual becoming I seek. Everything good in the world must make it so. This is a cry for help from a modest yet inevitable being. A cry for help indeed. Help me conquer those who steal life, labor, and liberty. Enjoy this book. There are more great books to come. And don't forget to support the free books for life cause. So very worth it.

# **rilmusic Discover**



## CHAPTER ONE

A very small but potent capacity captures dynamics in more than one infinitely possible mode, devaluing its deviation. Its distinction is never in its extraneous surfacing, but in the merit it carries over the impressions of time.

Lila Orileda's concentration in the tiny office was broken by an oddity within an oddity she knew to expect. Some came uninvited and unwanted. She was, after all, living in Offline Minnesota.

The town of Offline, Minnesota, was a bit of a stretch, a town built around Atlett College from the onset of its founding—a mainly intellectual college town. But the rich were soon to follow, building their extravagant lives around the college. And where the rich were, the money for business ventures knew how to bring in the help and the workers. A city of silent class but with reasonably outward decorum, it was where she called home. She was comfortable in it, especially because she made her career out of uncovering their secrets and solving their problems. Lila chose the town as much as it chose her. She had come to work after college and never left.

Allen Tenser came into her office walking backward, which to her implied he was yet in some unfinished thought process. Accompanied by the backward progression is the fact that he closed the door to her

[The things that happen to stop me from becoming someone else, however painful, are amazing.](#)

office. They had engaged in an argument over the closing of the perpetually open door to her office.

He didn't understand the need for such openness under such a circumstance and often complained her home was like some hideaway prison yard, some massive panic room camouflaging as a livable habitation. She explained her home was a different issue—one with a resolve to privacy, hers and solely hers to resolve. Her office was a public space. Why was he in such a habit of forgetting the space wasn't his? It wasn't fractionally his either. He had promised to try to observe what she imposed as a rule. He apparently failed at that.

She exhaled at the thought that he had sooner forgotten his promises. But the closed door also implied something was happening outside it. There was someone, something on the other side of the door, making him think. Closing the door to engage his thoughts and inducing his need to make a private attempt to correspond with her thoughts? Was it a client? Her excitement over some economically viable event on the other side of the door stopped her from complaining. "What's going on, Allen? Do I dare ask why my door is closed?"

His six feet, three inches tall frame paced briefly as he ruffled his dark straight hair with cautious fingers.

She narrowed her eyes, studying him, reminding herself to be patient with his instincts. They met when he introduced himself as the help she needed, who needed her more. A jerk of all nerdy trades, educated to

the fullest extent in mathematics, the deterrent to a polished career path was his anti-authority attitude, tendencies, and quirks. Her initial instigations largely leaned towards disregarding his instincts, but his relentless determination to work with her, coupled with his countless hours of volunteer work, encouraged her to adopt them.

She had never regretted it and had adapted to his quirks to her benefit. She offered him minimum pay. With his modest leanings despite his self-assuring inheritance, his economic stability established for life, he refused. Reasoning their relationship was great for him in the investigative milieu he craved, and having no need for the meager money she offered, he offered to work for free. His presence being a blessing without the usual financial detriment, she deliberately agreed.

He stopped pacing, faced her, and, reconsidering his instincts, opted towards fulfilling his promise by stepping away to open her office door slightly. He came back to stand on the spot he vacated, an act she was used to watching him display when he was excited. He stood on a spot demarcated as an exact midline to her office table. "As a matter of fact, there are two clients out there."

She rushed to a standing position.

Without uttering a word, he ushered her to sit back down.

She exhaled, lingered on her stance briefly, before indulging his instinct. Allen had a compulsion with space. It seemed space was calculated and calculating rather than fluid for him. He had the habit of going to places normal people would be scared of, refraining from places common to others, and picking meetings in strange spaces. She often pretended his unpredictable compulsion was more menacing than it really was. She minded it with complaints because she was afraid he could go overboard with such instincts.

His self-indulging quirks and dismissive compulsions made him unworkable outside her. He sometimes worked with her as if her business, a business she had painstakingly established and optimized, was his. A stranger could have thought so in passing. She had barely been able to live with his odd instincts when he volunteered. Without pay, she absorbed them easily as their understanding of each other's personalities grew.

She often made sure to pick up coffee, restaurant pay, and other small bills they incurred together whenever she could. He also had the habit of paying for things. Despite his endurable oddities, they worked well together. Their differences were made for great resolutions. He reasoned with a strangely impenetrable display of emotional decorum she could barely handle, tried harder than life to make emotional corrections for stranger circumstances. He was trying. She couldn't argue with the detached aloofness that made his reasoning skills distinct from hers. Their relationship, which the investigative community usually admired and

audited for understanding, was a much-earned professional chemistry.

"Whatever is making me sit here patiently at the moment when there are two clients outside my door?" she asked.

"The differentials require strategic rather than dynamic approaches," he replied.

She studied him, cognizant of the importance of approaches in the possibilities of retaining a curious client. She didn't voice the fact that she was scared to leave him alone with any client for too long because of the possibility of what might happen. She didn't know what might happen because she had never allowed it. She was certain at the moment that he wanted that privilege. "The curious case of curious things?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "Like two new clients behind my office door?"

He twisted his mouth thoughtfully. "The curiosity of knowing there is always a necessity for chaos as much as there is for refined procedural techniques."

She studied his demeanor briefly. "Who is who in this story?"

He engaged her eyes with the keenest hint of excitement evident in his deeply blue eyes. "One is a hopeless middle-class middle-aged wife in search of proof she is almost certain of—her significant other is cheating. The other is a rich woman in search of answers on who may have murdered her kin, a keen

curiosity on both who and why. Neither makes sense to the bereaved."

She frowned. He had been briefed by her clients before he envisaged turning them towards her office! She had hardly assumed she couldn't afford a secretary or a receptionist. Allen seemed capable of doing whatever he felt like doing as a volunteer. She didn't want to push too many buttons on what he could or couldn't do. He was, after all, an unpaid worker, a largely efficient one. "Let me assume correctly or incorrectly, but please correct me. You're assuming because the murder case may involve strategic rather than dynamic reasoning, I, emphasis on the fact that I have to do this... will let you have it while I handle the case a woman should handle because I am a woman after all? What will be the chaotic case less involved in strategic and dynamic reasoning?"

He hesitated briefly. "I didn't quite say it like that. But you are a woman after all, and I am sure you have endured disloyalty in such a way—"

"You're handling the cheating husband case," she said simply and got on her feet.

That instant, he took four steps away from her, one leg after the other, legs closed, before repeating the process again to have his back against her office wall—eight precision steps for a disagreeing stance she was beginning to learn not to resent.

She studied him. His mind worked like a ruler in such cases as his stance in the middle of her table took him there in some unresolved silent dissent, and he never missed a beat back to her office wall—a caged resentment. Was it his way of showing his disdain for her feminine authority, her authority in general? There was once he got too uncomfortably close to her to prove a point, arousing the anxiety she harbored with proximity. Does he think she doesn't notice these things?

It was her duty to get him to the place she needed him to be, to help him see the deliberate instinctual parameters behind her reasoning so she could energize his analytic skills. "As a business owner, I can not allow myself to risk the potential billable hours for the murder case. It could take six hours or less...however much I allow myself to believe in stuff from movies. It could take six months. But it could also take six years. And those are billable hours ensuring I keep a good and reasonable...hmm...emotional relationship with the client and a roof over my office. Something we both know I cannot entrust you with without engaging you financially...while not paying you? I must make sure that doesn't happen."

He squinted. "I know you to be someone who would not necessarily fake hours you didn't work for. Am I wrong?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes and No. I will never want to get paid for work I didn't do at all, but I always round

working hours up reasonably well. Billable hours do matter as a matter of business, which matters under the circumstances."

He was silenced briefly, thinking. However much he tried to hide it, his tone held a hint of threat when he spoke. "If I handle the cheating scandal case alone, my hours will be billable."

She exhaled, studying him, realizing there was little possibility he would threaten to quit, having made her business part of his everyday professional life, and the only social life he knew outside his academia friends. She squinted. "A cheating husband case," she corrected. "I can only afford minimum wage. I know you know that."

He held her eyes steadily. "I know you know you can not afford my real billable hours."

She studied his unshakeable demeanor. He hardly had to convince her. She knew she was beginning to need him more to solve her cases faster than she was able to do before. She could pick up more cases with a higher level of confidence than she could before. His volunteer work was important to her, and they both knew it. She was envisaging in some years to come, she could sell him part of the business, and she could work less or do something else, share her burdens with him in a genuine, profitable, and decent manner. But she wouldn't dare tell him at the moment. Will he need her less then? Could their analytic intimacy be too rare, too professionally interwoven, that he wouldn't be able



to work without her? She needed to get to know him more, to have the time to experience him earning the trustworthiness she was suspicious he was capable of. She spoke in a low, reassuring tone. "I tell you what, Allen, why don't I interview the murder case client, and you interview the so-called cheating scandal?"

The silence in the room presided for a while before a figure approached the doorway.

The woman she presumed was the richer of the two clients, dressed accordingly—in expensive clothing and solemn but evidently expensive custom jewelry, poked her head between the edges of the door to her office.

"I was wondering if the delay was because you were considering turning me down. Dr. Hammel spoke highly of you, Ms. Orileda," the woman said in a strained emotional tone. She opened the door a little wider to stand fully between the door frames.

The former state forensic pathologist's name caught her attention instantly. He had always had a romantic interest in her, and while she never engaged his interest, his referred clientele always paid well. She was never going to take his referrals trivially, with the possibility that the referrals would dry up once he knew she was never going to reciprocate his romantic interests. She shook her head. "Absolutely not, Ms..."

"Mrs. Castle...Mrs Eleanor Castle," Allen informed her.

Another figure moved into the space between the office door frames. "What about me? I was here first?"

The woman was in her mid-thirties, rough on the outlook, simple looking in jeans and an oversized shirt. And Lila wondered briefly if the woman Allen had measured as middle class was actually of a lower class. Allen, after all, was never raised middle or lower class. "Hello there, Ms..." Lila greeted.

"Mrs Cook...Mrs Rebecca Cook," Allen informed.

Lila held the woman's eyes fully. "We were just speaking about it. Allen has a specialty in cases like yours. So he will be interviewing you, but we will both be investigating the case. We do the cases together. Neither of you will regret working with us. Meanwhile, Mrs. Castle, please step into my office. I would like to hear about the case that's bothering you."

## CHAPTER TWO

The aches of time appear to us in its totality, yet in fractions it is coveted and stroked like some pet easily roused, easily vile to attack, and demean its beholder. We are betrothed to time, perpetually betrayed by it.

Mysteries are the sentinels of time, like dust, they bite, like bouts of wizardry, they recline into the void, deranged of trace, their graces thrown apart in their sway, and against discovery, their recovery never truly comes. There is a reasoning for causation from effects drawing on whims too close to their mark. They are easily missed, not for what they represent but for what they can't.

Mrs Castle appeared to be in her late seventies with a proximal appearance of someone much younger. Lila was accustomed to high-end clients having conflicting appearances with their looks. Her age was surmised from the appearance of her hands rather than her face. Her neck area was yet unforgiving of the times.

Lila forced the usual pleasantries, flashing a forced smile. "How are you doing today, Mrs. Castle?"

"I am not fine," she replied grimly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Lila managed in a lowly tone.

Mrs. Castle exhaled sharply, hardly pausing before she spoke again. "But my grief keeps growing...so I know I

must do something about it, or it would snatch out my heart and chew it without a care. Something is determined to destroy me for who I am, and it could kill my already tragic heart, Ms. Orileda..."

"For who you are?" Lila asked.

"Rich beyond the imaginations of those surrounding me," she replied. "Rich, definitely, not directly of my own doing."

Lila squinted, wondering what her words truly indicated.

Mrs. Castle paused briefly. "First, my husband died in that extremely suspicious car accident. I mean, why would he not just call a taxi? Why rent a car? And why would a perfectly new, perfectly luxurious car break down?"

Lila gained silence, wondering why the woman was discussing the case as if there were two dead bodies. Was she to charge for two separate events, considering the event timeline differences? Chasing two separate events could be the same as chasing after two different cases, possibly independent of each other. Chasing two separate murders occurring in the same space and time would qualify as chasing after one event with disparity. And there is always a quantifier in the economics of things. "A suspicious set of circumstances indeed," she voiced.

Mrs. Castle nodded in agreement. "Indeed, there is Theo, my husband's brother, who resented my life with

my husband, and would have wished him dead if he could. But why not wish me dead instead? There is Youyi, the son who believed he was conceived with a Chinese prostitute. And then there is the sister, Olivia, the entitled bitch who spent her inheritance and continued to rely on my husband's generosity until he died...I mean, was that supposed to have gone on forever? But again, why not wish me dead instead?"

Lila frowned, wondering briefly if what the woman needed was a damned good psychotherapist or psychiatrist. Harsh, it seemed, but something was amiss in the reporting. Was it symptomatic of grief or hopelessness? "There were many who could have wanted him dead?"

Mrs. Castle nodded. "Indeed. That's why it makes no sense that he could have been serial, just some victim of some random act. There is no way anybody could convince me of that. It's ridiculous."

And as sudden as a splash of a pungent clue could be to an array of seemingly endless, unusable assemblage of information, Lila's eyes widened. "Random and serial...couldn't be five by the swimming pool at the PlinePrime Hotel, could it?"

Mrs. Castle shook her head slowly, tears escaping her eyes for the first time. "It's the three at the roof party at the Stellarstar building."

Lila was silenced briefly, realizing the heaviness of the case she was about to take on. She narrowed her eyes,

leaned forward slightly, and spoke softly. "Your husband died at the Stellarstar?"

Mrs. Castle frowned, shook her head. "No, my husband died five years ago. It is my son who was killed at the Stellarstar."

Lila held Mrs. Castle's eyes unwaveringly and with the element of emotionality for the first time that evening.

\*\*\*\*\*

The silent preying of nature on the living over time is ingrained in irony—engaging tragedy, never from the innocence of some beginning but from the infinitely intertwined perpetual entanglement, the guilty pleasures of being alive dictate—tragically, comedically. Life becomes the perpetrator of its victimization.

Bella Mashley, five feet two inches redhead with modest beauty, was the closest thing Lila had to a friend. Despite having different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, they had been friends since college. And despite the harshness their relationship had endured through Lila's enduring years of chronic hardships, Bella remained. She was mostly willing to do anything to retain their sometimes fragile relationship. She didn't have to do much. Lila felt the same.

Bella was priceless to Lila and could have been in Allen's position with profit-sharing privileges. But Bella wanted to be her own woman without fumbling around in Lila's terrain. Lila had suggested Bella's current business because of her family's deep-rooted and historic involvement with the town's police department. The choice was also a smart move for Lila's career, a very smart investment for both of them.

There were two privileged positions Bella's friendship afforded her. Her company, *Bella's Biohazard and Crime Scene Cleaning Services*, allowed her access to crime scenes entrusted to Bella. Her special services, like Allen's, were free, except for when she very often picked up dining and entertainment services tabs.

Bella's aunt, Marie Heimlich, head of the city police evidence unit, gave her most of her crime-related requests and background information in the effort to support her career. Ms. Heimlich's seldom requests for expensive gifts never went unfulfilled. They were also never straightforward. She simply understood them to be demands, some form of payment for privileged services rendered.

She knew the crime scene photos would be extremely hard to get. It was her first unsolved serial killing murder case—her first murder case. Ms. Heimlich wasn't having it. It was riskier, she resolved—handing her two separate cases for the blow of one—two crime scenes with the same calling card. It took more than the usual wiles, more than the expensive gifts, the

pleading and begging. Lonely by choice from her profession and incessant need for bad motorcycle men who never stuck around, Ms. Heimlich wanted her company on a vacation she had no intention or time for. But Ms. Heimlich was adamant and instructed her to think about it without mentioning the request for crime scene photos and information. She had thought about it, knowing Ms. Heimlich would not make any reference to what she wanted until she got what she wanted. Reasoning the professional over the convenience of time and chosen companionship, she obliged the dreaded. She told Ms. Heimlich she would gladly clear her schedule and vacation with her.

Unlike her job as a software engineer at the bank, she had never doubted her path in detective work.

When Ms. Heimlich indulged her as a "friend", all expenses paid, they both understood the expense Ms. Heimlich had asked her for was her time and company. It was expensive.



## CHAPTER THREE

There is a science to obvious reality demeaning to mind, life, and reality, rendering them commonplace, choicewise, without discipline. There is what's taken, devoid of grace, and cannot be faced—it's peril never to be phased.

The trio on the dark rooftop had headlight helmets on early at dawn. Bella was earlier than her crew for the purpose of Lila's inspection. Lila had the obligation to be there early. And depending on his mood or sleepless state, Allen could have been parked outside anytime after midnight.

The area was too underwhelming—of blood—for a space involved in a killing spree. It felt the same in the crime scene photos? Some clean up after the fact? Why would that happen? She thought about the type of firearm used. Was it homemade and equipped with disintegrating bullets more fatal than deadly? Was it equipped with some specialized type of bullet? Some killer with a military background, a defense or law enforcement background? Or something extraordinarily sinister?

She couldn't shake the feeling of relaxed determination, cautious calculation. The crime scene was strangely neat, unentangled with the nature of the crime. Lila had to see it up close and personal, putting in a request with Bella barely an hour after Ms. Heimlich offered the

crime scene photos at the barbecue invite she arranged with her and Allen. They had burned the copies of the photos by the fireplace afterwards, assured that Allen had imprinted and committed most of them to memory.

The space was in chaos. Scattered debris everywhere, every which way—broken glasses, tables, chairs, all things broken and discarded for the sake of survival. That made perfect sense from the perspective of a killer. The dead tell the most mysterious tales—live survivors had a habit of running to escape horrible fates. It was more often than not that they ran helter-skelter, disoriented and flighty all the same.

The power of fear on the path of death, pandemonium at the edge of stillness, belonged to devil-may-know. And to devil-may-know was always a most egregious history waiting to happen.

Her silence was much prolonged. And Allen was ever patient with her. Most of the time, he needed her insight to form more deductive thought patterns for himself.

They had walked the room several times to come to stand in the same spot. They had done so again without linearity. Lila had ensured it.

Allen, dizzy against the repeated nonlinearization, came to a stop despite Lila's urgings. "We are not just walking around and around to get a sense of disorientation, are we?"

Bella stopped as well. "Bloody hell, hail Mary without much of the blood. Where's the hood for the drool?"

Lila stopped, turned to face one before the other. "You two are lazy."

Allen raised an eyebrow, thinking. "I'm not lazy...intellectually. I just hate physical stress and exertion, and scurrying on without limitations is not necessary."

Lila nodded in agreement. "No doubt about that. Your privilege helped you with that too much."

"No doubt Allen is lazy...But I can't be lazy," Bella stated. "I love and do physical work mainly. Neither of you does. People are fine with that, while most teachers disliked you for being a short-nosed snub..."

Lila hesitated briefly, deconstructing Bella's version of the truth, and smiled slowly. "Indeed. It was something about me...some deep-seated insight of what was wrong with what...rather than shutting up and taking whatever is fed as knowledge. There must have been something wrong with that coming from me. I almost hated myself before I took a keen eye to private investigation...something about the unexpected being some auspiciously suspicious reckoning."

"And here we are. And Aunt Marie couldn't help but urge you on, a price she may one day pay for. Yet she doesn't seem to care." Bella added.

Lila smiled. "And I have to pay for it as well. I don't care. You and I will be paying the price for that price this

time. I'm paying you to vacation with us while she's paying for me to vacation with her, or I'll die of sheer boredom. That's some unexpected, suspicious, auspicious anticipation, won't you say?"

Bella smirked. "You're paying me to go on vacation with you?"

Lila twisted her mouth, amused at the insinuation. "I'm paying you to go on vacation with me...the vacation is the pay, and Ms. Heimlich, the revered. And you must enjoy it whether you like it or not. You're the choice babysitter. In fact, you're the best."

Bella smiled. "And you're my best alibi. I silently swear to commit horrible crimes with the first hot guy I see. I deserve it. This job is un-enlivening."

"Not on my vacation dollars you don't," Lila replied.

"Are you two kidding me?" Allen asked dumbfoundedly.

They stared at him, amused at his reaction to their small talk but not surprised at it. He had no tolerance for such and was less tolerant of such in walk spaces.

"Indeed," Bella voiced, turning to him. "We must be kidding." She turned to face Lila again. "Now you know why I could never be your Allen."

Lila held Allen's eyes. There was a glint of life returning to him at the thought of having her attention at the moment. A moment to relieve his thoughts and insinuations on the subject at hand?

In an attempt to relieve the tension between the two, Lila took their hands to either side of hers, interlocked their fingers with hers, and proceeded upon the path again, pulling them along.

They obliged and eventually came back to the same spot.

Lila faced them again. "To answer your question, Allen. We are not considering orientation here but rather randomization from a fixed point of stance."

Allen closed one eye slowly. "Rather than a point of view?"

"This came from a stance," she replied. "There is the angular provision and the target indifference."

"Target indifference from the point of view?" Allen asked.

Lila shook her head. "It could be the opposite, as points of view could culminate from different points. The narrowing focus must come from the source. So it's not just target indifference but rather spatially marked indifference. The spatial differentials are set, but the shooter is indifferent to the target on the spot or proximal to some marked spot in his head relative to the location. Spatial location matters. So does the point of stance."

Allen frowned, rethinking her statement. "This struck me as a sign of marked intelligence. This is not an intelligent person?"

Lila hesitated briefly. "I agree with the signs of remarkable intelligence, but not from the perspective you envision necessarily. The choices are not just randomized but unintellectual. By this, I mean insensate and acellular. The targets are not rationalized to the patterning important to his deliberation on the choice of target. The pattern from that point of view was. There was no such deliberation per se. These are marked differentials with randomized possible values."

The room turned silent.

Allen held her eyes fully. "There are no victims?"

Lila shook her head. "There is always a killer. They are victims of randomized fixed inter-location based on the location of the killer, thus a randomization of a fixed location..."

Allen's eyes flared brightly with intrigue. "The interlocation is a fixed point of stance."

Lila nodded in agreement. "There is no personalizable essential form of victimization. So you are correct, somewhat...But it is rather that it doesn't matter who the victim is. There is a set quality of someone being in some set space, dependent on the dislocatable turn of an inter-location spot, or rather, a point as my intuition builds."

"The signature card," Allen replied solemnly.

Lila nodded slightly. "A single dot on a blank card. Ms. Heimlich said it was a reason they implied irrelevant motivations for the killings, the main reason they

believe the two massacres belong to the same unrelated proximal serial killer."

Bella, who had, over time, learned to trust Lila's judgment calls and was instantly trusting of them, spoke. "Does that mean he's not crazy?"

Amused, Lila raised an eyebrow. "If he is crazy, he is a specialized type of crazy."

But Allen was doubtful. "How do you know this?" he asked solemnly.

Lila remained silent briefly, pensive. "Have you read *Power House*?"

Allen squinted, studying her briefly. "Your fiction on the serial killing rapist? Of course I have."

"And so have I," Bella added.

Lila continued. "In it, the villain argues that when nature gives you beauty, it means your life is fair. Apportioned fairly, as it is an asset, you can use it to achieve other things. There are some things you cannot afford to have despite your beauty, or rather, fairness...such things as inner strength beyond your measure. If you force-feed yourself what you cannot naturally afford to have, the villain believes you must crash and burn."

Allen engaged her eyes fully. "Is this about his ideation and unrelenting belief that beauty is unified chaos?"

Lila nodded. "Straight to the point. Yes. Not on some auspiciously suspicious, discreet tenure of perpetual mystery where none exist. It is very much perceptible.

And it will be crazy for chaos to expect calmness rather than the chaos it craves."

Allen's eyes widened. "It will indeed be in opposition, given the set of circumstances you prescribed."

Lila studied him briefly before she regained her voice on the matter in a remarkably charged emotional tone. "But my intuitions are not merely peripheral. This is a direct opposition to the modus operandi of Dr. Harold Nemxis. He was all about marked differentials. His victims were smart, independent, achieving women, and from his perspective, are damageable goods, and no doubt his intended target."

Allen narrowed his eyes. "Intuitions and peripherals are hardly on the same differential platform when it comes to deductions, won't you say?"

Lila's tone was slightly charged when she spoke. "My intuitions are mainly targeted from experiential induction towards deduction to complete my analysis and conclusion in this case, and not the other way round."

Bella cast an indignant glance in Allen's direction.

Allen struggled with the emotional implications of the moment. "I'm sorry," he voiced.

Lila shrugged. "Why? It's mainly for the purpose of illustrating the details here. Why is it that Harold's name brings everyone close to pity?"

Silence presided around them.



Bella spoke, facing Lila, implying Allen had no emotional intuition on the matter. "I don't know why anyone would choose pity. You're the one who survived."

Allen turned to face Bella. "Do you ever have the courage to criticize her?"

Bella held his eyes fully, sparks of anger evident in them. "Are you accusing me of being afraid of my best friend? Or you're mad I have more fun with her than your rigid so-called stoic ass ever do?"

He shrugged. "Someone has to be realistic with her."

"Do you mean someone has to be able to overly criticize her?" Bella asked.

"Now if you two will let me finish my line of thought," Lila started indifferently.

Sparked out of their expressions of the strange dislike they harbored for each other, they both faced her.

She exhaled. "All the target spots seem equidistant from a certain central point and also equidistant to some two points out of three, which have a displacement that should not exist. There is no point of oddity worse than 33.33, and there is no derangement of oddity more unoriginal to resolve. This clearly pitches high contradictions relative to the simplicity of a point on a blank page. It becomes clear to me that, unlike Harold, the villain in my book, who springs chaos from chaos, this killer springs chaos from calmness. "

Allen frowned. "Wait, is the detective in *Power House* the owner of the chaotic theory or Harold?" he asked. Without saying another word, Lila walked away from the crime scene.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Someone great must make the worst of times the best of homes, someone greater the worst of homes, the best of times. Hopes are calculable tragedies, timeless and lost.*

*The open-barred window blew in highly pollinated wind from the flowering trees on the street. Lila was used to it, and, counting on the over-the-counter allergy medication to numb her to the expected symptoms, she faced the wind bravely, exhaled with pleasure in the sensation of warmth blowing against her barely clothed skin. She lingered by the window briefly, consciously washing away the monotonous events of the workday.*

*Her software engineering job for the Bank was predictable and unfulfilling. The investigative aspect of the insurance department of the banking endeavor was becoming more favorable than the general protocols of her job. Investigating fraud was not part of her job description. Yet, she was making up strange excuses to accompany the investigator and read the details of the cases.*

*Was she in the wrong profession? Was the wandering around, minding clues for unhappiness, some undiagnosed depression hangup? She couldn't have it all, but she wouldn't want anything close to that. The farthest from it. She wanted the simplest of lifestyles, aside from the occasional need to travel, to escape the*

*monotony of everyday life. But who was she fooling? She was very efficient at her job, accommodating, commanding, and programming the everyday outlet, proficient in the fluidity and dynamic implementation of everyday economic life without the need to participate in the socio-economic aspect of the community.*

*She was unhappy at her job, being a lot that was needed to operate the everyday implicit activity of the banking systems, while her importance on the scale of things was negligible when it came to what actually ran the community. She had people skills, but felt they were being utilized in the wrong space. She had no tact in dealings, no dealing in tactical engagement on behalf of money, but rather on behalf of events, as unpredictable as they came. They presumed her to be inexperienced in such things because of the scientific nature of her job. She had that overwhelming need to have a job, slightly engaging her need to adopt and adapt the people skills she secretly coveted in the manner she coveted them.*

*She got into bed preoccupied with the thoughts of the financial security her job supplied compared to the improbable sufficiency of a different calling she was uncertain of at the moment, closed her eyes, ruminating briefly on some dream job that could eventually make her happy in her vocation.*

*Trying to fall asleep, she couldn't relax her anxieties enough to suppress her conscious need to nap.*

*By the time she noticed the shadow moving, he had sprung onto the bed, his left hand instantly grasping her*

*throat. Fear flooded into her uncontrollably, but his hold on her throat prevented screams from escaping her voice box.*

*He stretched his tall, full form on top of her, enveloping her into the comfort of the bed, his troubling, throbbing erection pushing against her leg.*

*"Are you ready?" he whispered in a hushed husky tone, sharper than some unknowable effect of brain damage, burning into her mind immediately. Yet the voice was soft and hushed. She could have imagined within a dream that he was her boyfriend, at play with foreplay rather than the inevitable burglar rapist she took him for at the moment.*

*"We're going to have immense pleasures tonight."*

*There was something else about his voice—a ting to his tone she had noticed earlier. It told her he was used to being considered deterministic in decision complexes. He was used to authority in some way she couldn't easily discern, one she was certain indulged his wishes. Subdued, with his hands holding her neck tightly, she wondered if he hadn't indulged in the same manner of criminality before.*

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Life has a way of writing itself out of triviality; its screen cannot undermine its script. When it is taken for granted, the human presence is trivialized, diminished, and what doesn't minimize becomes memory.

She picked at her fruity oatmeal, comparing it to his large plate of cholesterol-loaded toasts, bacon, eggs, sausages, and steaks. Why wasn't he worried about weight the same way he couldn't worry about paying for the meal he was certain was essential to solving the cheating husband case?

They were sitting inside a Hilton hotel restaurant, and she couldn't shake the fact that the client wouldn't be able to afford the eventual billing for the food. She couldn't consider how to present the troubling fact to him. He was going to pay. Their economic views were extremely different. He grew up in riches. However humble his appearance most of the time, his attitude toward money is always that of a rich man. Hers was an opposition.

She ordered oatmeal, and he ordered a cholesterol-ridden ridded extravagant breakfast. She could ignore his discomforting natural inclination towards money for as long as she could restrain her instincts to remind him of the disparity. She couldn't ignore his economic disposition on behalf of the eventual customer billing. They were eating at the Hilton! On a Saturday! It was supposed to be their day off. Allen had no day off. She knew that. Unfortunately, her lack of romantic life ensured that she had little choice when he called to say the meeting was important, reminding her she had promised they would work both cases together. Yet she was always shy to tell him he would pay. She couldn't bill a client this way.

“You know Allen...” she started.

“Hmm,” he hummed.

She sat back in her seat and held his eyes slowly. Was that a slight smile crossing his cheeks? She had learned never to take his reasoning for granted over time. “Sometimes comfort can be a fault,” she announced.

A full smile graced his mouth. “Now, that is quite an interesting paradoxical take on life.”

She narrowed her eyes, studying him. “It is indeed paradoxical, but it depends on perspectives.”

“How so?” he asked, holding on to his smile.

She contained her reaction to his indifference at the moment. “Well, comfort can, in some instances, give you a sense of satisfaction and progression, fully seemingly aware of these facts. From some other perspective, it makes you regress in life without even freaking knowing it.”

He didn’t release his awkward smile. “Who is this unaware fool?”

“That’s where this paradox in this case is ... I am the unaware fool, unknowing with the certainty of regression.”

He broadened his smile. “I am paying for this smile, this breakfast, and picking up the client’s tab whenever she can’t.”

Lila shook her head, wondering why he liked having her walk a thin line on knowledge she deserved.

He studied her, holding on to his smile. "Is the frown another paradox?"

She squinted, unwilling to react harshly while he sustained his cool. He always managed to retain his cool. "You didn't dare!"

He shook his head. "I don't believe there was a daring attempt involved."

She cautioned her tone before she spoke. "It is my business we're discussing. I have every right to be involved, to know what's agreed to not by me but by my terms of service."

He studied her. "Problem gone...You will get your money, and I will get car tunes, washes, and repairs free for as long as it takes from their car shop. Or so she says. If I never need the services, that's fine. But you will get more than your share of compensation, and you may even have fun along the way. We should discuss what matters..." He hesitated, examining her reaction.

"You didn't dare take a client and promise to help her pay," she said simply, reconsidering the client's perspective on the issue.

He sustained her gaze with an attempt at a serious one. "I have an announcement to make...I have officially joined a secret arm of the KKK."



Lila smiled, sarcastically, holding his eyes fully, seeming unaffected by his statement. "What you do with your leisure hours is your business..."

He smiled. "Whatever will happen to your reputation?"

She shrugged, relaxed into her seat again. "It's always a secret arm or leg with the KKK, which knows no appendages...I mean, what the heck are they hiding under that dark-cored perpetually beige hood, and what's that got to do with me?"

"Stop it," he urged devilishly.

"You stop it!" she snapped. "Stop this crap right now. Dragging me out of bed towards an expensive meal to tell me you're joining the bloody hell KKK! You stop the crap right now!"

He dimmed his smile. "Okay, whoever, for whatever reason, Mr. Cook is cheating on his wife? I needed to infiltrate the so-called boogeyman arms and legs of the KKK to find out."

His approaches, which she often disagreed with as extreme measures relative to hers, often made him a fit for eventual resolutions for her cases. His motives towards preserving the integrity of the discovery process were impeccable. She had never been able to argue against his motives. Yet she lingered on the possibility that something could go wrong in the moment. Was that a possibility at the moment? "We can always say no to Mrs. Cook. By the nature of her

associations, she probably had it coming some way or the other. She married him.”

“The intrigue surpasses the danger,” he replied simply.

She raised her eyebrows. “Now what sort of metric rule obliges that ridiculous notion?”

“The very fabric of mysteries and detective work,” he replied simply. “Besides, I gave Mrs. Cook my word. I’m invested in it. And I can’t do this without you. I don’t want to do this without you.”

“How did you know of the professed superiority of Mr. Cook’s race, aside from the dark-cored beige covering itself, that is?” she asked.

He smiled. “Mrs. Cook allowed me access to all computers in the home. I also cloned his phone.”

She leaned forward in her seat, her hand rising to grace her forehead. “Why am I here?” she muttered under her breath.

“To have a meeting,” he replied.

She exhaled, held his eyes fully. “Why am I here at the Hilton eating inexpensive food while you pile your plate with expensive excess fat?”

He smiled. “Would you rather have the fatty stuff?”

“No, but it is delicious.” She stretched her arm to take away the large plate of excess in front of him, pushed her bowl of barely eaten fruity oatmeal towards him,

“You eat the oats,” she said, and tossed a strip of bacon into her mouth. “Why oh why am I here?”

“To have a meeting before the meeting before the meeting,” he replied. “I am checked into the hotel early for a night meeting with an unknown person to pay my dues and say my vows...merely compounding... so I can go to the cloaked meeting...which is reportedly exponential, yet irresistible for my investigative instincts.”

She picked up one of the large fried sausages on her plate. While chewing on it loudly and seemingly uncaringly, she smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Akin to being by oneself is to be by oneself lost in a daze of one's own making—a combinatorics of substandard appendages, grieved by none other than one's inner thoughts. Sitting by oneself in a pool of random oddities leaves no witnesses. Not even oneself drenched by the ego. There isn't an elegant repeal to a superfluous ego. There is no appeal to its transcendence as a redundancy unto itself.

Allen wondered why they had to wear the hood. Aside from the fact that he wasn't there for some psychotic episode stemming from an obsessive compulsion and issuing psychological commands from a deeply seated throne of toxic pride while being made redundant by its ceaseless need to be stated as fact, he felt something surprising. He felt, in the presence of the Klansmen, a

subtle sense of inferiority to an upstanding, reasoned man. And simultaneously, he felt a sense of superiority to his fellow Klansmen—he felt, despite his familiarity in appearance, like an imposter in a surreal manner.

The fact of the matter was the darkness within, sustaining the hood. A Shakespearean episodic play being written in real time? To be or not to hood, to hood or not to be, will you be a plague or an imposter in an unreal manner? As he convinced himself the discovery was not merely for the cheating scandal mystery but for discovery and self-education, he heeded the command to raise his right hand in the name of the American God to pledge allegiance to the Ku Klux Klan.

## CHAPTER FIVE

A resolve to the enigmatic is hardly that for the exploration of a problematic history. But is the rabid, if otherwise silent, imploration of its undoing, for a future discovery?

She wiped the sides of her mouth before putting down her spoon to hold his eyes. "A distinction?"

Oblivious to most of society's social demands, every neural end of his cells paid attention to any and every mystery-solving thought procession. The man lived for such perpetually deliberating ideations that may lead to a resolution.

Lila loved the process, however much she dissuaded it sometimes. She noticed he hadn't touched the lunch she ordered for him.

"We have to conquer the distinction parameters involved in this case," he replied.

She squinted, studying him. "Attesting to the complex nature of the case?"

He shook his head. "Acknowledging the numeric complex makes the job a metaphoric overhead."

She sat back in her chair briefly. "An overreach?"

His voice was charged with much reserved undertones when he spoke. "Why would the same person kill eight to get to kill one target?"

She exhaled, raised her back. "The questions are piling up for the dilemma without any seeming resolution possible? Are we trying to solve a case or eight? Or worse. Are we solving eight cases for the price of one?"

He smiled.

"There is the larger problematic mode," she commented.

He raised his eyebrows, holding on to his smile. "You mean there is something worse than the numerics?"

She exhaled. "It's deductive, as you like to say, for analysis. It concerns an enigmatic deduction from the numerics. It's quite concerning."

He was all ears. "Indulge me."

She spoke in a low, uneasy tone. "If we can't tell if we're dealing with an unknown serial killer, one with a signature card unlike any or a killer who chose randomness as a means to a deadly end, we may be circling the drain."

He sat back in his chair, thinking.

Lila studied him—the firm-minded man, who could hardly suppress a smile against a serious discussion.

The residual of a smile graced his lips when he spoke. "The question is whether we're circling the drain before or after the fact."

She frowned. "What could be the determinants for this disorienting trajectory, yet timely question, Allen?"

He smiled, holding a subtle hint of mischief. “It depends on where the hole you call the drain we’re cycling is.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A mystery is a litigious ligament attaching itself to the bone of another mystery. Deboned, it is an insubstantial mystery.

Lila envisaged the best was highly probable from the situation—the best and worst possible scenarios packaged in the body of one simple question. Yet because of the high probabilities of the presence of surveillance systems, she couldn’t voice the request.

Moral aptitude is never truly apparent in any case, she thought as she approached the reception area of the Goodtime Motel. And she promised herself that if she found a middle-aged clerk behind the desk in the reception area, she would reconsider the endeavor, turn around, and call the trip a waste.

A young black man was seated by the motel reception desk.

She studied him briefly and quickly lessened the odds she wasn’t going to achieve her aims for the trip.

She slipped a carefully worded note to him detailing the information she was willing to pay for. “Do you know how I can get to the event reservation center?”

He nodded in agreement. And told her it’s a straight journey, some miles down the road.

A few minutes later, he located her outside the motel and handed her a note as she handed him a monetary note.

\*\*\*\*\*

A power reckons itself with a source, a circuit with its power, a flow with its circuit, a breakage with its dissipation, and an end with its path.

Lila was the only woman in the meeting room of the prodigious Atlett University of Science and Technology. There were six others in the room with her. Their presence was courtesy of Allen, an alumnus committed to their causes with time and money.

Seated at the head of the table, she studied the room and smiled. She wasn't going to have to pay for the consultations. And whatever Allen paid for it, she didn't want to know.

She was only familiar with one person in the room. Prof. Aron Fischer, the middle-aged, reliable, and calm-looking intellectual. Lila was instantly attracted to him, and he showed interest in her. But she quickly refrained from him based on rumours of the problematic relationship with his ex-wife. Allen, his friend and colleague, couldn't confirm or deny the rumors. So that was that for that.

Aron introduced her to the room.

Leigh Pierce, whom he referred to as a newly qualified doctor, a PHD graduate retained as his personal Assistant Professor, appeared a modest-looking man



in his thirties. The boy-faced redhead Jason Deimleich, the best post-graduate mathematician in all possible worlds, managed a smile as he was introduced hyperbolically. Dean Richardson was the boy-band looking twenty-something from the computer engineering department. And Caleb Jones was recommended by the Physics department.

Lila smiled as Allen retrieved an unoriginal copy of the signature card and placed it on the table.

Pierce's eyes widened sharply. "Is that it? Is that the signature card?"

"That's a copy," Allen replied. "It's quite easily duplicated. Odd. And we're yet to find any useful meaning for such a common oddity."

Lily spoke. "Whatever could be a deathly driven anatomy of a point against a blank?"

"It's apparent it has no appendages," Dean commented with a smile.

Lila was thrown off slightly by the line of reasoning. "You mean like arms and legs with which to move?"

Dean shook his head. "I mean lines with which the point can orient."

The room was silenced, briefly.

Lila spoke. "What is it now?"

"It's a point," Dean replied.

She frowned. "Is it not a point on a blank card?"

“It can be a point on a blank,” Jason replied.

“I don’t see it that way,” Dean said. “That’s the point.”

“Caleb?” Leigh called.

Caleb hesitated. “It will be impossible to say a line is a line on a blank.”

Silence resided in the room briefly.

“What do you think it is if it can orient Dean?”

“An insect,” he replied simply.

## CHAPTER SIX

An intrusive vignette encompasses a passage, an exclusive outage presages contempt.

Lila felt she was rolling up on a dream. The crime scene didn't involve her expertise. There was hardly a crime scene. And by the time they got there, there was no crime scene tape. Yet, Bella was there, shocked and confused about the sudden turn of events. This time, the trio stood back-to-back like a tripod, screaming to be freed from the location of the shoot.

A single shot towards a single unit amidst one of the most crowded spaces in the city, Rutherford Square. A single body landed on the ground among the crowd. Not a single cross bullet or cross damage to be found, unlike the others so far. The bullet embedded itself in the heart. Found under the body, the signature card was not as immaculately placed as the other two. The card was bloodied with the victim's blood.

\*\*\*\*\*

Duplicity has a source. Double duplicity is treachery. Doubt is a billion contrarian thoughts burning in the slippery oils of affirmation, even in the face of alternate proof. Doubt need not have a source.

Allen had been quiet since the visit to the crime scene.

Lila indulged his reserved silence until she couldn't. Work had to be done, and she needed his participation. She also knew that only intrusive thoughts could pull him out of his determined, silent preoccupation. She relayed some reserved information.

Adam Locke, the victim, had an upper-class upbringing, having little but a notable teenage assault on his record. Otherwise, as an insurance banker with a lot of money on his mind to manage, he was clean as a weasel. Could he have been the single target within the spree of targets?

Allen was much preoccupied with his thoughts, unwilling to be drawn away from them momentarily.

Lila waited a little while before speaking again. "What is the probability of killing a unit with an uncountable set?"

Allen rubbed his palms against his forehead. "On the one hand, it is inconceivable as it defies the very notion of probabilities. On the other hand, it couldn't be improbable because it happened. On the third other hand—"

Lila frowned. "A third hand?"

Allen nodded. "Indeed."

She drew her head back and twisted the edge of her mouth. "Humans don't have a third hand."

He held her eyes intently, dissuading her doubts momentarily. "Yeah, but degeneracy does. So does the

randomized probability that you can exclude the unit. In randomized probability, one plus one equals half. If you then step outside the rules, you can get one point five. You can then step outside the unit to initiate another random probability from the excess half.”

“A fraud,” Lila quipped.

He nodded. “Indeed a fraud.”

She frowned. “Why would he suddenly become a fraud?”

He narrowed his eyes. “He?”

She exhaled. “This is a troubling, rigorous mind, one with a strict gamer policy, without emotion or remorse.”

“But with strict enthusiasm for the game. I suspect a gamer as well. One who views mathematical relativity within our world as pure abstraction, like a piece on a game board. It doesn’t matter how he gets the win. The strategy of the play is what’s pleasurable.”

“And I am scared to think of what great evil comes after killing a unit. Must be something monstrous.”

He nodded in agreement. “Like a third eye embedded in the human frontal lobe...indeed it is.”

She gained silence briefly, knowing she had his full attention. “I discussed my suspicions with Eleanor Castle.”

“In what manner?” he asked.

"I told her there is a preponderance of evidence leaning towards the fact that her son's death may indeed be a serial killer's doing rather than a known assailant's," she reported.

"And..." he inquired.

"She asked me if the serial killer to whom I referred was someone or something?"

Allen smiled. "Could this killer be something? Some wild animal, perhaps."

She smiled. "Perhaps, but Mrs. Castle wanted to know whether my inquisition was a subtle demand for more money."

He widened his smile. "You didn't make such a demand, did you?"

Lila scratched her nose, smiling. "I sure did after she suggested it, and I complained about how draining it could be. My rate is officially what the big dogs charge."

"Premium rate?" he asked bemusedly.

She laughed out loud. "Besides the change, I want to know if you're up for this. Chasing a serial killer will be intellectually and financially taxing. And now I know I couldn't do this without you. Are you up for it? If not, I can tell her to find a bigger, more resourceful firm."

He held on to his smile. "Every step of the way. Resource means nothing without the worthwhile mind behind it."

She held on to her excitement gracefully, getting up in the moment to face the writing board in her office. It held the names of victims. She studied them briefly. "We don't have the details on the recent incident. Yet, I think it is wise that we shouldn't discard the specific target theory."

Allen settled into his seat. "I think it's splendid."

Lila underlined Alexander Locke's name on the board. "On Locke..."

He could almost double as the probable target...as Brandon Castle. They both have upper-class backgrounds. Things could turn out not to be random between the two of them."

"Everyone is in money, new money, old money, money nonetheless."

He nodded in agreement. "Which reshapes the killing field towards Erica Baile, lost old money. And the inevitable shapelessness of the five at the hotel..." he reads the name on the board. "'Andrew Score, Elizabeth Blise, David Foster, Chris Priestley, and of course the fame-hungry politician inserting herself wherever the campaign money may be—"

"Don't they call those prostitutes?" Lila asked playfully.

He smiled. "I believe the name of the Madame is Sarah Madison Scoff, a politician who married into wealth."

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't they call those Goldiggers?"

He shrugged. "Politicians. They are called a lot of things." Allen rose, and Lila took to her seat. After all, she had met the board on display—his handwriting was a memorable display; legible and bold. It was his to explain. She was to preempt and prompt his thought process from the display. She didn't want to overdo anything. But she needed his perspective on the problem so they could resolve the case. "Given a statement of fact, a direct statement of contradiction, situationing a unit not as a possible target but as an actual target, the odds are higher against the odds. Are we odds-out?"

He considered her question. "We can never be odds-out. Someone actually committed these crimes. We are nonetheless at great odds. That is, if we want to adopt the random possibility of a random killer. There were about twenty-five people at the hotel, and five people were killed, which gives a combined possible manner and mode of killing to 53,130 without order in mind. That's too many choices in the combination of five specific individual deaths."

"More oddities," she added.

He nodded. "And there is the luxury space, which takes three out of twenty-three and gives 1771 specific combinations of individual mode, manner, and combinatorial probability. There is a wave of field dynamics always involved. This is a bold-faced confident killer whose every action matters."



She leaned into her seat, a concerned expression on her face. "There is something quite troubling if this isn't a serial killing case. Why kill the unit? And does it mean the killing ended? There are too many odd numbers to go around forever."

"Those are great questions, Lila," he added. "There is yet that great difference between the two randomized probabilistic events, which I couldn't help but compute. It is very big at 51,359. And something is troubling because it has every odd number between one and ten except seven."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

There is no deliberation for a legacy of pain. It never trickles its rampages in the silent mode over time.

Lila had imagined the worst at that very moment—with him staring at her with a self-amusing smile. His body on top of hers. A stranger, a demented, uncaring stranger, like some inexplicable bolt of insanity, was inside her home.

He sat on top of her instead, staring down at her as he retrieved a choker with a large, round black ball. He caressed it softly, his wicked teasing smile running down her spine as the sharpest of pain. He shoved the ball in her mouth. And the stretch strings of the choker touched the base of her brain stem.

She grasped for breath, choking down her pain without grace, stiffening her body, gathering up some strength against the seeming verge of death and invasion. But he was muscled, much stronger. And the seeming effortless strain of his lower body on her midsectional strength assured her of this. She knew her struggles would further amuse him, arouse him.

He spoke in a deep husky tone. “ You know, darling, in a way, I am a virgin here. I have never had someone like you before.”

\*\*\*\*\*

There are the edges of prejudice that are benign and unspoken. There are those that are loud, sharp, and vicious. There are those in between, hardly spoken; vicious all the same.

Prof. Shaun Connor looked the part. In fact, he was emblematic of the part. He was an intellectual. He looked like one. He was in academia. He fit in one.

Allen was in the middle of his verse. And the outsider in him wondered why he had been summoned. What could be the need for his request, his company? What was going on in academia that was important for him to know? What secret could the pseudo-member require from a revered member? He could never be one of them. He was sure of that, however much he was always in the loop on what was happening.

He had declined the intellectual life because he had been certain he wasn't a people-person. He was a particular person's person. Lila soon agreed he was correct on the point. Most of those he went to school with, his friends, had been able to achieve what he couldn't, despite the fact that they had the same qualifications as him.

Prof. Connor was not one of his friends. He was well into his sixties, with red-blondish hair and a beard like a sage. He was also, within the measure of academic life, an intellectual celebrity. Fischer had been certain he had requested him by name.

And why were they slab-dab in the middle of a lecture hall with closed doors? What is the probability that the guys were playing some ridiculous trick on him?

Connor spoke in a hushed tone. "They came to me."

Allen frowned. "Who? Who came to you?"

Connor drew his head back and stared at Allen as if he was supposed to get whatever it was he implied.

Allen deepened his frown. "Who came to you?"

Connor held his eyes fully. "I had this room cleaned by the tech department before you got here."

Allen was silenced briefly, a worrying expression overtaking his frown, wondering if he was about to land a new case for Lila's agency. "To make sure no one is spying on you?"

"Yes," Connor replied.

Allen studied Connor's reserved expression. "Why would you do that?"

"They came to me," he repeated.

"Who, why, where?" Allen asked in a puzzled tone.

"They're following you," he warned.

Allen gained silence, unwilling to repeat the question, one of the most intelligent men he knew understood perfectly.

Connor exhaled. "They knew you went to see Fischer and the boys."

Allen's suspicion began to solidify. "They? This pronoun...is it monosyllabic?"

Connor followed the line of projection. "I can't account for the syllabic qualities...there are no vowels involved...the consonants are a three-letter acronym of the same type...a vertical line and two slanting, dangling diagonals."

Allen was no longer in doubt. He leaned in towards the renowned professor. "They who shall not be named?"

Connor hesitated briefly. "They who say, you, are one of them," Connor replied. "They, who are my Klan?"

Connor nodded in agreement.

Allen absorbed the shock of the confirmation. Why would they not come to him? Why go through someone he hardly knew, someone who seemed more afraid of him in the moment than the damned KKK? "What do they want?"

"They say there's no home for you unless the nii.... the negro woman goes," Connor replied.

Allen had hardly thought of it—he was to be investigated as a new member, however much he qualified to have simply walked in. He had followed them. They were going to follow his steps. They must have followed him to Lila. They must think they were lovers. They did not know their professional relationship was the joy of his life. They were reading small notes wrong, from afar. What did they say they were going to do to the black woman?"

Connor shook his head. “Nothing. But they say leaving her is the only way to be with them.”

Whatever could he need them for that necessitates getting rid of the best part of his life? “Over their dead body.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Life fervently tries to have the unexpected, restricted. It resurfaces like an iconoclast, roaring against our thoughts and actions, testifying on behalf of our fates.

Lila rolled around in her office chair before unsettling Allen further by placing her crossed legs on her office table and leaning back into her chair. She held a teasing smile, "I'm pushing you down, Allen. You'd better catch yourself."

Rather than frown, he smiled.

Her laughter could not be contained. "You won't dare choose me over the Klan, would you? Why do I not feel elated while I'm pushing you down?"

"They were never a choice, Lila, and you know it," he replied.

She shrugged. "And how dare you make that decision without consulting me...to bring them around, I'm not bringing you down enough?"

He shook his head. "Your client brought them into your office as her husband is a bona fide member. I truly believed he was a gay troll or something like it. Just doing my job."

She held on to his eyes, which were the warmest she had ever seen. "You could find another job, you know."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't give this one up for the world.

She squinted, reconsidering her thoughts. "I could give up the cheating scandal case."

He widened his eyes. "You'll do that for me?"

She nodded. "Yes, that and to get the KKK off our backs. If she marries a low-down, dirty, racist scoundrel who also happens to be a cheating dog, let her deal with it."

He smiled. "No way. I won't want to miss a chance at finding out who the low-down, dirty piggy Karen is, he's cheating on our unsaintly client with."

"A pig or two," she corrected, smiling.

"A pig or two," he replied, beaming. "Dogs like those."

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An uncertain turbulence settles itself score against score, the resolve for which there is no controlled manifest for a controlled interest.

Lila stared at the painting in the Harplet gallery with a curious rush of skepticism—a single black point in the middle of the blank white page with red streaks of strings.

"It's not entirely like the calling card," Allen commented.

"You think the card he leaves behind is like a calling card?" she asked.



He narrowed his eyes, holding on to the view of the large canvas. "It is a mode and method of communicating something, his involvement being the most obvious."

"Ego or spectacle?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. He could have gone without a trace. He chose one, whatever his reasoning."

She studied him. He thought it was irrelevant that there was some painting out there that looked similar to the killer's footprints. He thought it might help to see it. Unimportant was the need to interview the artist.

"It's a point of view you may say," he commented.

She shrugged. "If you're only viewing things through an artist's perspective."

He frowned. "It's a point without view?"

She squinted. "It could as well be a blank with a point, which makes worse sense."

He glanced in her direction. "We have little to go on meanwhile. We need to make sense out of the senseless."

She held his eyes. "This is fake relative to the so-called calling card. It is fake by mode, means, and measure. What the killer left could have been footprints in the snow, which is useless evidence at best. This is all-out and loud.

He turned towards the painting. "There are no implications, direct or indirect. There are no indications, direct or indirect, that this has any individualized reference or any reference to our culprit. But here it is here, clear, proximal, and loud."

She twisted her mouth. "Indeed...without any implication or value. The acts were loud. The calling cards were small. The calling card is a contradistinction, an attempt at contradiction."

He exhaled and turned towards her again. "Then the painting is worse than an imitation, some copycat cat signature? It is a conversation piece attempting abstraction, and with both attempting the contradistinction. The artist is doing it all counterintuitively."

"It doesn't matter if the painting was done before the killing was done or afterwards," she added.

He nodded in agreement. "It doesn't matter if it was painted today or if Da Vinci made it. The element to consider is not the calling card or the acts if it is a deliberate contradiction. We need to figure out who this killer may be."

## CHAPTER NINE

A flying fish assumes simplicity in that it will land back in water from its space flight. To what does it owe its loyalty to survival? To air or water? What odds in between the two does it have for its own survival? What odds weigh its loyalty and disloyalty?

Rebecca Cook sat in one of Lila's office chairs, holding a contented smile.

Allen, whom Lila had refused to brief on the matter at hand before the meeting, sat in the other chair. He had complained he was chasing the tails of a seemingly faithful husband who was committed to the quietly bigoted and probably savage workings of the KKK.

He had a lot to learn, she had decided. And she had her ways of showing him what he didn't know experientially. She had, over time, managed to engage with the strict workings of his mind. She had learned the fluidity and the quiet dynamics she introduced with simple conversations. She admitted to herself meanwhile that she liked engaging his mind. It was one of the best aspects of not working alone as she used to. It also gave her a social aspect to her private and professional life. He needed to engage deductive reasoning from the subliminal senses—outside the fringes of his cold-blooded instincts for fact-finding.

Lila forced a smile as she faced Rebecca. "Mrs. Cook, I'm glad you're here."

Rebecca smiled excitedly. "So am I."

Lila continued. "As I told you on the phone, we have a break in your case."

"Who is she?" Rebecca asked eagerly, a twinge of mischief to her tone.

"It's a he," Lila responded simply.

Rebecca's jaw dropped.

Allen widened his eyes.

Lila continued. "His name is Kenneth Larson. He's a married man with two kids who is notorious for having extramarital affairs. You know him, don't you, Mrs. Cook?"

Rebecca's mouth closed.

Allen's narrowing eyes glanced towards Rebecca at the implication of the moment. He had questions for Lila that he couldn't ask in front of the client. How had he missed such craziness while caught up chasing the Klan alongside the client's mark?

Rebecca sat back in her chair; the excitement that had spelled her demeanor was gone. "When did you know?"

Lila held her eyes fully, now certain both Rebecca and Allen had misread her. "When my partner didn't find out the truth about your husband as you claimed, fast enough. I tried figuring out what you were up to. And

found you and Kenneth. Whatever can you be achieving, Mrs. Cook, by leading my agency on a wild Goose chase?"

Allen shook his head. "And making me pay, partly for it."

Lila contained her smile in the moment.

"I'm sorry," Rebecca replied, in a low emotional tone.

"That's the other thing Allen..." Lila started, yet restraining herself from smiling by picturing how ridiculous it would make her feel in the moment. "... Mrs. Cook is a very cunning woman. I can't imagine you paying when she can clearly pay."

Allen narrowed his eyes and turned towards Rebecca.

"I'm sorry," Rebecca repeated.

"And she'll pay every penny...it'll be charged to her account," Lila added.

Rebecca nodded in agreement. "I will...and I will pay from now on. Charge it to my card. But I demand that you stay on this case, Ms. Orileda, please. I need something for the divorce."

Lila shrugged. "You've got it. That something is the affair you're having. There's no proof he's doing the same."

Rebeca's solemn demeanor did not change. Her voice was firm. "I assure you he is."

Allen frowned. "And how can you be certain of such a thing, Mrs. Cook?"

"I read his most sensitive texts to his best friend before I came to you. It says he will divorce me for her, whoever that is. I swear he is having an affair. I will pay for you to find out who it is all the way. I will pay every last penny for him to be found out."

## CHAPTER TEN

The ego has divergent tendencies in its approach to expression. It is calculating, blinding in its fastness and fury, ill-determinate in its alignment with violence. It stems.

As a self-assured, well-tempered rational male, Allen had a part of his reality that was easily readable. While his temper lingered shockingly and lovingly in his relationship with Lila, the woman who had the ability to engage and excite his mind in a way no other woman could, he had always had a hold on his emotions. It would be unintelligent to let such run amok. It would be unlike him.

He scanned the appearance of the man sitting in front of him. He was out of place, even more so in a seat he wasn't invited to. He was out of place with his attire and appearance—the edges of his swastika tattoo easily observable from the upper section of his unbuttoned bright-colored shirt. Nobody was supposed to be in his familiar restaurant space, sliding into his seat as if he had a right to be there. Nobody was invited. Nobody was there.

Then nobody said something, anything?

“What did you say?” Allen asked.

The man's uncaring expression didn't change.

Was he supposed to be scared? Allen held the man's eyes fully, wondering if a few hardcore intimidating stares were what scared Connor into doing their dirty work for them. Did they have something on Connor? Was he one of them, playing a part, pretending to be scared?

The man picked a beefy piece of Allen's meal off his plate and threw it in his mouth.

Allen watched him chew.

"I can't believe you chose a nigger girl over your brothers," the man said, accusatorily.

Allen dropped his utensils, knowing he wouldn't be eating any more of the food. Straining the muscles on his face, "I don't have a brother," he said.

The man smiled, picked up another piece of meat, and threw it in his mouth. "You should reconsider for the sake of the nigger girl."

Allen's anger glared in his eyes. "She's not a girl, you buffoon. She's a woman."

"Did you just call me a buffoon?"

Allen's expression did not change.

"I'll buff the floor with her for that stupid word."

Allen's eyes glazed with anger, while, as usual, he retained his calm. "She's not the kind of woman to accept a blind man's buff. You want to try?"



The man leaned slightly towards Allen. "There are ways big boys can make that happen."

Allen's anger had overflowed. He didn't bulge. "If you come anywhere near her, I'll kill you."

The man stiffened, surprised to hear the strength in Allen's tone, the strange composition and delivery of his words. He drew away from Allen. "You can try stopping me or killing me faster than you can think?"

Allen's cold, angry eyes were unrelentingly focused on the man. "If you come near her, I'll kill you."

Without another word, the reddish-blond-haired man, who walked in without an invitation, walked out without another word.

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Life echoes a rendezvous for tragedy as an appointment we can never make. Its contact, deserved, undeserved, expected, unexpected, is always disagreeable.

The number of intellectuals in the room increased in direct proportionality to the belief that the nonavailability of answers in the case implied they weren't dealing with some next-door neighbor, that average American serial killer. Rather, they imagined an obsessive-compulsive, highly educated, intelligent man.

With the new profile, Lila suggested they approach those who could give them possible answers. The

additions were not merely numeric. Gerald Fielding was another mathematician, Harry Searns was another physicist, and Ned Trent was another mathematics professor. Fischer was also present.

Lila was, again, the only woman in the room. She started the conversation. "When you kill, what's to make of a point?"

The room was silent briefly.

"The point is the unit of a point," Gerald said.

"In Physics, you may call it a unit of space and time," Ned replied.

Lila narrowed her eyes, thinking. "Then space and time must exist for the unit to exist."

The room was silent again.

"Space and time are not a unit, are they?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, they aren't."

Ned held a thoughtful expression. "It is what must exist for anything to exist."

Lila gained silence.

"Yet there is a nuanced implication of a unit," Ned commented.

Lila remained silent, thinking. "Correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Trent—"

"Ned, Ms. Orileda," Ned interrupted.

“Ned,” Lila continued. “Are you saying a point is a unit of two things, space and time? Or that space, time, and a point must exist for anything to exist?”

The room was silent.

Lila spoke. “I’m thinking maybe a point contains space, time, and itself, a point.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Allen added. “Space, time, and containment.”

“Great,” Fischer injected. “We have come to a reasonable point in space and time. We must consider the space and time relativity of the events.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

There are great and grave errors in separating humanity from nature—the lies told not to be the underbelly of the beast and the beast of the underbelly.

Allen held on to the fear that wasn't really his to have. Yet his mistake took him to fear. The problem was his to solve. In a rented car, he tailed Lila indirectly by being with her without shame. With the excuse that he believed there was a high probability they were being surveilled, he was with her almost all day, tailing her to the secure haven she called home so he could rest. He was worried he risked her life from the besides-the-point mistake—that of joining the Klan.

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There is no greater witness to character than the ego, inseparable from the self.

Lila was grateful to have incidentally employed Allen, who refused to be employed by refusing to get paid. And she never let it show. She had rationalized it as something she deserved, having been a so-called “good person” all her life—some subtle karmic expression of harboring no ill will and working to uncover such ills as murder. Was it that? Or was it him, being able to afford his lifestyle without depending on anyone else? Life was just that—good or ill, whatever life charged at her. And she had her share of both.

They arrived at the restaurant an hour early to have quiet discussions about the cases at hand before the three friends from the university joined them for more discussions.

"We need a new office space I'm willing to pay for," Allen argued.

She had tried to ignore his request to have a discussion on the subject. It was becoming apparent he wasn't going to relent on the issue. "That's the problem, Allen. Rent is tax-deductible. I have to pay. Yet, I cannot live up to your expectations."

"I'm only paying the retainer and anything else necessary if you need those. Or the margins if you can't afford it. We need to be in a more secure state."

She felt the same way. But not quite as heavily as he does. Was opening the door to her office relatively insecure? Or was it insecure because she was now taking high-stakes cases? "Is this sudden need mainly for your convenience?"

He shook his head. "It's mainly for security. Your office door is always open...unlike your secured home..."

"And what am I thinking? Don't I know you sort of live there as well during working hours?"

"Don't you think that should change?"

It was a subtle reminder that he was an employee she couldn't afford.

She studied him. “What do you know that I don’t know?”

He exhaled with a devilish half-smile. “Do you know that now that we’re handling bigger cases, our security systems have to be optimized accordingly?”

She relented. “We need time to move to a bigger space. We also need preparation for that move.”

He twisted his mouth teasingly. “Do we? Do we need time when I can provide the place and preparation plans?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have time. My forced vacation is next week. It definitely won’t be enjoyable. But I must go. You can take the time you have all to yourself in the office to secure whatever you can. And sometime in the future we will have a bigger space. You need your own office, assured?”

But Allen held on to the silent foreboding that something bad could happen to her because of the company he had chosen to keep, without much forethought, mainly because he could. But he held a reassuring smile. “That sounds reasonable.” He held on to the suspended silence that ensued. He didn’t want her to inquire further about the issue.

Lila broke the silence. “I was wondering if this case in point is an expression of neatness, a compulsion, so to speak.”

He didn’t jump at the chance to end the previous line of discussion. He was entranced by the new line of

discussion she introduced. "A case in point, that seems an appropriate name for this case."

Lila nodded. "Indeed, it is."

Allen continued. "If it is the compulsion that matters to this mind, what could be the point? A black point? A white point?"

Lila shook her head. "White couldn't be the point. It isn't, is it?"

Allen nodded. "It couldn't be."

"If it were, it would be unreadable and pointless."

He held her eyes fully. "And that wouldn't be the point here."

"Absolutely not," she agreed. "And if the point is pointless, it will be nothing against one another from point to point...nothing at all unless elements of life can be read from it...since it's a killer's path we're tracing..."

"Except if its perception of cleanliness is from the point of view of a perfect crime," he added.

They were silenced briefly as Fischer, the mathematical-physicist, Pierce, Fisher's protege, and Caleb, the thorough physicist among them, made their way towards them.

Allen held a gleeful smile.

Lila was delightful in their company.

They ordered.

Lila picked up the pen for her notes before she spoke. "I was wondering if the case in point could be mistaken for some kind of totem."

Caleb answered. "You mean like a class group totem?"

She shrugged. "Something emblematic of a prejudiced group, the KKK or whoever,"

"No," Fischer replied.

"No," Pierce added.

"No," Caleb added.

"No," Allen added.

Their thoughts, voiced in procession, seemed a concurrent soliloquy. She frowned. Could they have the same reason for four de-affirmations—a potent tautology—soliloquy in reverse?

"They don't have the same architectural factors," Pierce explained.

"Or the same lineament—unless directed artificially and intentionally, as in some form of drawing, they can't be," Caleb added.

"Nor do they have the same dimensions, or the same propensity for such," Allen added.

"A case in point is an elemental aspect distinguishable from the known totem," Fischer added.

"Or any known totem?" Lila asked.



"Or any known totem we know of that we can tie it to at the moment," Fischer replied.

"Which brings us back to the necessary elemental factors we must decipher," Lila said.

"Space, time, and events?" Caleb asked.

"That's why we're here," she replied. "I was thinking you can help make sense of things."

"The first?" Caleb asked.

"A luxury hotel swimming pool party...five dead," Lila replied.

Pierce's eyes brightened. "Numerics...seems a part of this whole plot system..."

Lila nodded. "Space, time, events, and numerics."

Allen drank some wine before he faced Pierce.

"Numerics, what about them?"

"There is something fascinating about their dispositions here," Pierce replied.

"Or displacements if I may," Caleb added.

"Or misplacements," Allen said.

Lila knew how to engage the men without them going off the deep end. She also knew if left to their own devices, they would do just that. "The numeric representation in five...what says you guys about its nature relative to space, time, and event in this case?"

The men were silenced briefly.

Pierce spoke. "It is, to me, in this case, the additive factor causing chaos...because five plus five is ten and ten is not a unit digit. The unit digit goes from zero to nine—"

"So does the unit line," Caleb added.

Pierce hesitated briefly, thinking. "We can say the line goes out at nine, necessarily, coming from zero. So we have a pseudo-generation of fictionally projectable or probability—projectable chaos from a midpoint."

Pierce focused on Lila's perplexing frown.

"Why not a multiple factor?" Lila asked. "Five times two is as well outside the unit digits and the unit line."

"Because two do not appear in the series," Pierce replied.

"Because two is even?" Lila asked.

Pierce hesitated briefly. "Simply because he didn't include it...then we may say he didn't include it because it wasn't odd. Or we could be talking about something else if its absence is more a matter of probability."

"As if the numerics were not the intention of the killer but a matter of randomness that draws pure random sequences?" Allen asked.

"Yes," Pierce replied. "We don't know what he is thinking at this point..."

"I have a feeling precision matters to him," Lila said.

Pierce nodded. "I agree with the profile, but we still have no certainty as to the intent of his mind."

"Nor the extent of his mind," Lila added. "What may satisfy the possibility he's not on a strict oddity path?"

"Another event," Pierce replied simply.

But for the subliminal noise in the restaurant, all was silent briefly.

Lila faced Caleb. "Three die in a roof party in a high-rise luxury building."

"Three is the main oddity proponent in the unit sphere because it is the oddity proposing the progression of the oddity line—" Caleb started.

"Which I won't be able to call a sphere—" Allen interrupted.

"The unit line," Caleb corrected. "It has an additive factor and an exponent factor, as three times three is nine. That's three-squared. Three and nine are directly related oddities with a difference of six. And nine is the last odd number in the unit line scope."

Lila squinted as she faced Fischer, the oldest intellectual in the room. "We've come to the unit in the community sphere. Isn't this the biggest proponent?"

Fischer nodded. "Yes...very much the biggest proponent except for a case concerning zero on the other end..."

Lila frowned. "Why should we be worried?"

“Because we are, as Allen corrected, dealing with a line and not a sphere,” Fischer replied.

Lila retained her frown.

Allen made an effort to clarify Fischer’s words. “Nine is merely a number in the number line whose imaginative projection depends on the existence of a zero in the unit line.”

“The very necessity that can be against it but must be, must exist, necessarily, for it, for it to exist,” Fischer added.

“Against it?” Lila asked.

“To create the spatial negatives,” Fischer replied.

“Which must be on a number line that can not necessarily be called a unit line,” Lila added.

“The strangeness of mathematics is glorious,” Caleb added

“Inglorious, bastardious and absolutely ingenious,” Pierced added with a smile.

“But not quite infallible,” Lila added.

“Not quite,” Pierce agreed.

“Not quite indeed,” Lila replied. “So, I think it’s best we fix our interests on the unit which started with a midline of chaos stretching out in two directions without accountability from the unit.

“Then a midpoint chaos at a hotel swimming pool party kills five...” Allen started.

"Instability," Lila said.

"Uncertainty," Caleb added.

"Probability," Allen added.

"A slippery slope," Fischer added.

"A dream state," Pierce added.

"A need for control," Lila voiced.

And all was silenced again in agreement.

She continued. "A roof party in a high-rise luxury building kills three."

"I think this is the dealing table," Pierce said.

"It's a three-legged table," Lila commented.

"A truce before the chaos," Pierce added.

"A tree extension after the collapse of a fake sky," Lila said.

Pierce smiled and held Lila's eyes. "And...?"

"Height...one that comes from chaos," Allen added.

"Going from a chaotic midpoint to a luxury height," Lila added.

Configuring a geometric possibility is difficult..." Caleb said. "I see a crime wave."

"Indeed it is," Lila added. "Height, roof party, luxury height, a euphoric double rush gotten from a probabilistic pool of events, a lottery height from killing the five."

“Indeed, it is,” Allen supported. “Killing the unit must be a tailspin power trip.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

An instance of vice reckons an immeasurable trace of pleasure in which virtue is unrecognizable in its phase.

Lila loved shopping for food as much as she loved cooking them in the security of her home. It was leisure, that is, compared to spending all day worrying about how to solve her cases. The endeavor was a necessity. And her appearance at Grent's, the particular store of a chain nearest her home, was a usual event.

And in the middle aisle of nuts, raisins, and snack mixes, an attractive, muscled Caucasian approached and stood beside her.

He smiled.

She smiled back.

"Which of these nuts are you nuts about?" he asked with a broader smile.

She held his eyes briefly to study him. Was he trying to flirt with her? "It depends on the point of decay."

He frowned. "Point of decay?"

She smiled, pleased at the momentary derailment of the expected. "I am kidding. I make their differences in the way that I cook and consume them. I eat peanuts and pecans raw and salted. The seeds and almonds, for instance, go with bakery and such."

“So you cook?” he asked delightfully.

“One of my favorite pastimes,” she replied delightfully as well.

He moved slightly closer to her, as if to rediscover something he missed.

“Lila!” she heard Allen call her from the opposing direction from which the muscled man approached. She turned around as he turned the corner towards her. “Here you are...” he said, moving towards her in a rush, a state she had hardly ever seen him in. “I was in need of something, and I thought I should ask you...” He leaned into her and kissed her teasingly on the lips.

She was stunned. And tried to hide it as she faced the stranger again. But the stranger already walked away from her. “You forgot your nuts,” she said softly. What the hell was going on? She faced Allen again. “When did we become pseudo-romantically entangled?”

Allen smiled. “When you met Mister ‘you forgot your nuts’ over there.”

She widened her eyes. “You don’t say?”

Allen pulled her towards the exit. “I can, but we can’t discuss things here.”

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*A strange anomaly settles towards its peril, a familiar one settles in the comfort of the most personal of thoughts, the assailant, perilously, lurking, against the appeasement of its strange abode.*



*He held her eyes with the familiar ludicrous smile, one that poked a frightful tear at her heart every time he formed it.*

*He brought his head down towards her again, kissing her throat. "We should take this slow," he whispered.*

*Her thoughts became fatalistic. Her life had been damned-nearly immaculately strung-along. How has she deserved this—this seeming fatalistic dream in the hands of a sexual sadist conjured from the pits of some hellish world?*

*He migrated from her throat and chest area towards her neck, stopped short, and went back to her chest. He placed his ear on her chest to feel her heartbeat. Drenched in fear, she could feel his arousal throb against her as he traced her skin towards her ear to bite down on it harshly.*

*She swallowed the immense pain, only allowing a guttural groan to escape her. She considered the probability of escaping the pain. Could she push against and past his strength to make it to a reasonably safe distance? Could she not?*

*"You want it now?" he teased.*

*She muffled the cries escaping her.*

*"Oh, don't be a whimper," he urged. "You don't want to take things slowly; you should say so. Why cry about it? We're having too much fun. I'm falling in love with you with every move. Now that you mention it, I think we*

*should take things slowly. Let's have dinner first, as it should be. I'm hungry."*

*He pulled her up by the neck and pushed her towards her kitchen. In the kitchen, he tore off her nightgown, grabbed the bulk of her kitchen knives to spread them over her kitchen table, and set his gun down on the table as well, before taking his seat.*

*"Darling," he said in an endearing tone. "I'm famished. What's cooking?"*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The human instinct is easily expressed in theory—that it is in the fight for survival—that there is a hint of survival in not-fighting.

Lila was confused. And Allen was back to his sullen aloof self.

“I don’t imagine you are a jealous man,” she said.

He shrugged. “I’m not.”

“Especially when the woman in this case is not one you are romantically involved with,” she added.

He nodded, smiling. “Indeed.”

“In fact, you may say this woman is your boss,” she suggested.

He broadened his smile. “You may say we work together.”

“It will be irrational to find him jealous of the full blooded single woman he works with’s possible romantic partner,” she said.

He shrugged. “Sometimes a possible romantic partner is a stalker, a criminal, a killer.”

She raised her eyebrows teasingly. “Then you’re jealous.”

"I'm not," he denied. "Sometimes what we experience is not what it seems."

"Like a single man chatting with a single woman at a chance meeting at a local grocery store?"

"That especially," he replied.

She twisted her mouth, teasingly. "Are you stalking me again, for a professional reason?"

"If that's what you call making sure we are not incidentally killed by those we investigate, you may call it that," he replied.

She studied him briefly... "Does it mean I am not allowed to be the single woman I am because of those issues?"

"There is particularity to the issue, Lila. I have witnessed the guy around you before."

She exhaled, put the event behind her, and decided on a different issue. "We're getting a new office with updated security systems."

Allen smiled, happy the discussion was over. "I'll share half the burdens or all as you wish."

You must need your own office more than I thought," she teased.

He shrugged. "As a matter of fact, I will rather live in your office."

She held a sarcastic smile. "I can't imagine someone is after us for the serial case...I can't imagine someone is

after us at all. Maybe it's all paranoia encroaching upon your mind, Allen..."

He narrowed his eyes. "With success doesn't come the most notorious of vices from sheer envy, or come what may? Paranoia encroaching upon my mind?"

"Maybe it's the compulsion based on paranoia because of the seriousness of the serial case..."

A smile teased the side of his mouth. "Compulsion based on paranoia?"

She refrained from smiling. "Maybe that's it."

She allowed the silence to sustain.

He studied her. "You cannot imagine why anyone may want to harm you?"

She exhaled. "I can, but killers don't need a reason."

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Life offers an impromptu visit. We stretch it out, one lifetime at a time, in the attempt to overstay our limit.

Allen didn't like to cook. He never had to. He hardly ever did. He loved visiting specific restaurants on specific days. The restaurants knew and respected the patronage of the lonely, good-looking gentleman who kept to himself and often ate alone.

The handsome man with the swastika tattoo, whose name Allen had found to be Dennis Durst, slid into the seat in front of Allen.

*Le Astite* was a different restaurant from the one he was in when they had first met. And it was on a rainy Sunday, the only day he strayed from going to the office, the only day he spent without engaging Lila or his friends. It was daring, he thought, that Dennis invaded his reserved proximity uninvited again.

The man's notorious tattoo was covered on this occasion, as it was at the grocery store.

Allen felt far removed from the conversation he was about to have with a stranger he didn't care for. But the man had the habit of feeling entitled to any space he occupied, especially in expensive restaurants he frequented. He was unresponsive when Dennis picked up the bulk of his plate and tore at his steak. He watched him eat for a while. "You must love steak," he commented.

Dennis shrugged, chewing the food loudly. "Sure, but I have had better than this..."

Allen restrained from the urge to respond negatively to the man's upsurge of rude behavior.

Dennis continued. "You think you can come into our brotherhood and betray us without paying a price, without repercussions?"

"That steak is not cheap," Allen said with a shrug. "And you have no brotherhood. You're filled with nothing but hate. Yet, you're eating my steak."

"You think you can, can you?"

Allen leaned towards the man. "Do you know there is an underbelly to black? It's a beast of an animal who erroneously yet tragically imagines its height, so it imagines its north. It imagines its west, imagines its east, and therefore imagines its south."

Dennis smiled. "Must be the polar bear...this beast...?"

Allen shrugged. "At least the polar bear does not imagine its beard... it has no such thing...this beast imagines extinction, so it imagines its life."

Dennis managed a mean expression between chewing. "Must be a doggone fool!"

Allen returned his mean expression with one of his own. He spoke in a sullen, cognizantly assured tone. "I told you not to come near Lila again."

Dennis dropped what was remaining of the steak. And spoke in a stern, uncompromising tone. "I told you you can't walk into our brotherhood and betray us without repercussions. You and your nigger girlfriend are marked."

Dennis picked up the towel on the table, wiped his mouth, dropped it on the plate, and walked out.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The weaknesses of scandals embolden strength through embellishment in the anonymity of acts. Life can sometimes be the scandals we invoke in ourselves.

Lila realized Allen was accurate in his attempts to ensure he didn't handle the cheating case alone. Cheating cases comprised most of her cases. She was the female detective whom most of her clients, mostly females, knew had the ability to solve most of her cases. She wanted to keep it that way. And with a new case on her schedule, she moved to take over the case Allen had termed the cheating scandal case without informing him of such a move. Her method focused on a pattern of activities outside the toxic pastime of hood-wearing and Hitler-praising.

Allen was certain they were wasting their time chasing the case, and accused Lila of collecting unworkable monies from a desperate but clueless woman of low intellect.

Lila had insisted they do their best before giving up on the case. And informed him she was putting herself in the "situation" at a designated fast-food restaurant. She entered the restaurant to find the situation was unexpectedly quiet. The children, the two of them, were well-behaved.



She ordered something to drink and informed Allen she would be there a little while. She stayed, for a boring while, painstakingly staying the course of their meal. It could have been something other than what she knew it to be. Any lay outsider could have thought the foursome was a family unit out to lunch. And any insinuation that the event was more than ordinary was in the way the two adults looked at each other. The way their fingers brushed across the table, intentionally as one passed the other the salt.

Allen walked into the restaurant after the supposed family unit exited. "He's having a love affair with the nanny," she announced.

He smiled, sarcastically. "They don't have a nanny."

She smiled, amused at the unmistakable reality that her ability to detect the gravest of man's defects and shortcomings—cheating and all instinct relevant to its telltale signs was well beyond his. It didn't come to her easily. Nevertheless, she basked in the subtle triumph of the moment. "Not a personal nanny, Dear Dr. Allen Tenser. True, they don't have that. He is having a clearly affectionate affair with his best friend's children's nanny."

He raised an eyebrow. "I confess I couldn't see that coming."

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Abstraction stores itself in art. Art imagines the space it occupies.

ETI, Extra Tenable Instincts. Lila called it when she engaged in some extra overwhelming sense she had missed something, something quite tenable, when a particular instinct brought her back to the same place, the same space, the same situation. Usually, it was one she could have originally discarded as irrelevant.

And standing there, it was no longer just the same place, space, and situation—its *deja vu* was torn off a strange history calendar. It housed something, something not quite obvious, never so close.

She found it in the same approximate space, in the same expected domain, but with a different interpretable rendering. The painting was larger than the ones she had witnessed with Allen. It was one with a red point, a white background with black streaks of strings on it.

Lila had an eerie feeling, a foreboding of ill-feeling, like a precursor to a contagion, the disposition of a disorder, no longer just an abstraction of art or something like it. Something monstrous was blooming. And she had to get closer to it to feel it. The painting she had seen with Allen—the black point with a blank background, and red streaks made of strings, was not as large as the new one. The old and the new seemed anomalous—a juxtaposition of derelict objects of abstraction in space.

She wasn't expecting a scientific object of art—that will be mathematical and observable as such. The absence of such denoted the supposition of obscurity. Was it

intentional? Some intentional or subconscious intensity in the new painting stared at her without words. It was as if some new malevolent knowledge, information, or event had changed in the painter's expression. What were the odds in the impossible-to-depict-with-precision abstractions in the artworks that could point to a possible killer?

She had looked around for the painting she viewed with Allen, despite having a photograph of it in her bag. It was no longer in the gallery. Was it sold? Was that the reason for the new one? Or was its absence due to something more sinister than its presence was?

She summoned the petite blonde, Sharon Ternston, who informed her that the painting was donated anonymously and she couldn't reveal the identity of the donor.

Lila couldn't accept the answer.

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Difficult relationships, in their realistic enduring frames, bear their fruits.

Detective Morton Dash didn't fancy Lila Orileda. If Lila had a term for their relationship, it would be "difficult". Yet, Lila ensured their relationship was sustainable at all times. She needed the people in the local police department to do their best job in order to help her.

She couldn't find a single reason to like Morton Dash. She didn't hate the man. But Mrs Heimlich once told

her he believed private investigators were the scums of his field of work.

Morton gave her a loud no on the need to inquire about the anonymity of a publicly available painting in a gallery. She knew the police were nowhere on the case. They had nothing. What were the odds Morton wouldn't check out a possible link he didn't have to work for? She thought it would be a test on how he really felt about her.

She requested that she go over his head to Police Chief Deyvon Trate, an African American man who made his way to the top by being calm, collected, and reasonable in handling situations, in order to document the purpose of her visit. And did so. The chief, who welcomed her help whenever she offered it, rested his head after she explained the situation.

"You think we should arrest a suspicious artist for his drawings?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I think it's important that we at least know who the anonymous donor is."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There are no brand exposures for particular lives. No essential value outside the being. Genetics is a trademark for a particular life, untouched by the superficial theories of evolution. Those who imagine they own or inherit the lives of others do not merely imagine; they are already dead.

The man in the stolen old black Sedan was unrecognizable. He wore a glued-on fake beard covering the majority of his face and an old boy's cap. He sat back in the driver's seat, where he had been for a while in expectation of the clockwork ritual.

He didn't care what the reason for the routine was, but suspected there could be a ring of prostitution and other illegal crimes being committed in the dark corners of the restaurant. It was the kind of restaurant one would quietly wonder how it made any money during the day, all for a day's meal. The night buzzed with all sorts of events. It was a routine that took time and effort to uncover and needed precision to be fruitful. The stolen Sudan was easy. No one had reported it stolen. And it was possible no one would, before it was quietly returned.

Dennis emerged from the Italian restaurant sometime after midday. On this occasion, there wasn't a soul on the street but the two of them.

A creature of self-assured habit, Dennis didn't look back or hear the silent approach of the man with the fake beard as he approached his Ford F-150 truck. He opened the car door and was busy counting a load of cash without any thought of the usual routine. After all, his pick-ups were uneventful.

The car window was down, and the man who appeared before him like some sudden tornado in a shadow, holding a 6.62 Ferrari & Ken pistol. He saw the pistol first, the man, a shadow, before two successive silenced bullets were injected into his head.

The bloodied money fell onto the floor of the truck, and Dennis's head touched the steering wheel.

The man with the fake beard made his easy exit.

\*\*\*\*\*

Life engages a series of perceptions. A routine shows itself. A serial remakes itself.

Allen parked the old Sedan, checked for and retrieved the OEM master key, and then exited the car without incident. By the time he parked his car in front of Orileda Detective Agency, his glued-on fake beard was gone.

Lila smiled as he walked in.

His smile touched his eyes, relief overwhelming him with her welcoming smile. He took the moment to take his unusual steps away from her, taking his back to the wall in her office and the usual steps back towards her.

Lila squinted. "Again with the imposition in space? What's going on with you?"

He moved forward to sit in one of the client's seats. "I'm wondering what to do with myself for a week while you're out there having fun."

She shook her head. "I'm not having fun. I'm babysitting Mrs. Heimlich and writing my next mystery novel. Any chance I get, I get to have Bella do the babysitting."

He shrugged. "It still doesn't explain what I'm going to be doing."

"Heimlich will say no to you being on this trip. So that's out of the question," she replied.

"Should I trust you with another cheating scandal case?" Lila asked.

He drew towards her in his seat.

She held his eyes fully. "Can you catch the accidental nanny and the cheating husband going at it in the best friend's home?"

He smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lies imitate in kind. They master our instincts in languages of distinctions, extinctions, and the facades of our projected salvation.

Lila and Allen stood in front of the writing board in Lila's office with the photographs of the paintings pegged to it.

Allen picked up the enlarged photograph of the calling card. It looked like a blown-up doll compared to the calling card. He pegged it onto the board in front of him.

"Hmm," she hummed appreciatively of how Allen always backs up her thought process to aid her. "That's interesting."

They stared at the three—the case in point with a black point on a white background, the black point against a white background with red streaks of strings, the red point on a white background with black streaks of strings.

"This is a Monkey's imp," Allen commented.

"A Leprechaun's spring," Lila commented.

"A Pixie's dream," Allen commented.

"This is horrific," Lila commented.

Allen studied her. "Do you care to clarify the terms for this horror show?"

Lila widened her eyes. "It's certainly a nightmare on M street...and M is for murder..."

Allen raised an eyebrow to indicate he needed more clarification.

"Altogether, it looks like a plot," she commented.



He exhaled. "It is no doubt deadly-becoming."

"The most relevant question is whether there are contingencies between them," Lila said.

"The two paintings are attempts at the crime scene card," he said.

"Then what makes them different from the card matters?"

"The streaks and the strings...the streaks and strings are attempts at movement in clearly catastrophic directions," Allen said.

Lila followed his line of thought. "There is the black with red streaks of strings."

"Never gonna happen unless there is a vertical formative influence. That is, a gravitational stake that cannot break the space."

"A T?" Lila asked.

"A T without the tension, a vertical y axis, and nothing more relative to the x axis. If you phantom a fall, which you must, if you want to create an artificial functioning system for it, which you also must, then  $dy/dt$  is zero with t being the imagined x component. Therefore, the streaks of strings are reaching beyond their means with no true beginning and no end in sight. A true bullshit lining. The red point must be differentiated from the black point. The black one can retain itself in space, but the red point has no natural ability to pull in its direction. They are not directly parallel. The red is

one-sided. So there can be no direct equilibrium between them. There is no way for those things to be. The red one is surely a falling scheme because it is not equitable to the black point without the T of the vertical axis, which the x-axis does not function with to retain itself."

"The black and the red are not equitable, not on the same level...?"

"Not on the same platform as well..."

Lila maintained a thoughtful expression for a few seconds. "Then the lack of equivalence is true?"

"Which it is," Allen added.

"Then something like the KKK flag is a horrific anomaly?" Lila inquired.

Allen had a sudden spark in his eyes. "Through and through! It is one blob of red. A red point doing an overreach into space to steal what it does not have..."

"A Monkey's imp to steal life and demean others?"

Allen nodded. "Absolutely that? There is no black point there...it's a crazy, unintelligent scheme."

Lila exhaled. "Do you know what this means?"

"Empty barrels scream the loudest?" he asked.

"Not that. The cheating scandal case and the serial killing case may just be one and the same."

“And that could be the least of this Monkey’s imp-Leprechaun spring-Pixie dreams shitshow,” Allen concluded.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Life runs in reruns in possible positions and solutions for its plight.

Lila was not having fun. Hardly. She wasn't writing her detective mystery either. Hardly.

Bella was trying to cheer her up over the fact that Ms. Heimlich had found a young boy toy, and she was certain their babysitting time would be somewhat curtailed.

"If I could, I would pay a reasonable sum to ensure she gets what she has coming. She needs a release," Bella said with an excited smile.

Occupied with US and local news at the moment, Lila retrieved her attention from the screen briefly to engage Bella's eyes. "She sure did. That woman sure knows how to get what she wants."

Bella held a more mischievous smile. "In all possible universes and all possible vacation spots, she sure does. But truth be told, she's not the one who needs a boy toy to restore her vacation state of mind. No one needs it more than you, Lila. When was the last time you got cheated on or dumped by a guy who probably didn't deserve your attention in the first place?

"Now that you put it like that, why ever should I engage in such crap?"

Realizing Lila was absorbed in her on-vacation work at the moment, Bella got up to exit the room. "I'm going to find a boy toy, Lila. And I'll keep reminding you, whether you like it or not, you need to relax a little..."

"A little euphemism for a lot," Lila commented.

"I may bring two boy toys back. One is yours," Bella teased.

"Those things are easy, aren't they..." Lila commented.

"If you bring back two, they're both yours."

"The more the merrier," Bella teased.

Lila narrowed her eyes at the thought of Bella going on and about in the same room. "Don't you dare. Or I'll get another room!"

Bella smiled. "I dare you to do it...I'm getting my groove back, whether you like it or not."

They both laughed as Bella made her exit.

Lila faced the screen again.

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Life does not do turn-arounds on trauma. It reforms its scars.

Leigh Pierce was in shock. He was lucky, thus far, to have been arrested in his home. It made sense for what he was willing to allow them to do, so they could move on to some other suspect or unsuspecting victim. There was the threat of being arrested looming over him, for the suspicion of murder. It was a strange

situation to be in, and the possibility of being arrested would be even more compromising, potentially tarnishing his reputation regardless of his innocence. Serial murder at that! It was extremely unfortunate and disappointing when, after searching his home, he was arrested. What could they possibly have found? Why had he been so afraid and easily intimidated by their threats to agree to a search of his home?

And sitting in the interrogation room, he regretted it all. But he felt the need to know what they could have found to warrant his arrest.

Detective Dash came into the room with a notebook and a pen, but Pierce knew it was inevitable that they were being filmed. He was also expecting a file.

Morton flashed a forced smile, a forced fake smile. And Pierce wondered what was funny.

"Professor Pierce, I am Detective Morton Dash. Would you rather I call you Leigh or Mr. Pierce?" Morton asked.

"Pierce will do it. The professor still feels strange to me. The same as this arrest."

"About that..." Morton started before reading him his rights.

Pierce frowned. "I want to know why I was arrested."

Morton hesitated briefly, studying Pierce. "I am going to get to it. I just want you to be fully informed that you have been read your rights. I know you're a professor."

Pierce touched his forehead with his palm briefly. "So do I. And I will choose to suspend the extent of my rights at the moment if you choose not to drag out this interrogation and come out and tell me why I was arrested. I don't want any psychoanalytic jargon?"

Morton frowned. "Are you threatening me, Mr. Pierce?"

Pierce shook his head, wondering why Morton diverged to such violence-implicating terms. "That's not my intent, Detective. I am telling you that there is a formal and rational way to deal with this...with a sense of accomplishment at both ends. I want to know why you arrested me after I innocently and nicely allowed you to search my house?"

Morton studied Pierce briefly. "I am going to get to it," he said in a less authoritative tone, wondering what mode or demeanor could be most beneficial for a chance at an interview without Pierce's lawyer present.

Pierce altered his tone accordingly, speaking in a low, guarded, and emotionally charged tone. "You have betrayed me in ways you probably cannot comprehend, Detective Morton. But not any more than I betrayed myself today in thinking you could be trusted not to arrest an innocent man for something he didn't—"

"There is probable cause for this arrest."

Pierce closed his eyes and opened them slowly, as if disbelieving his presence in the moment. "That's the question that needs to be answered so I can reconsider calling my lawyer."

“Did you donate several paintings to the Harplet Gallery?”

Pierce frowned. “I bet a bit of charity work qualifies as the reason for being arrested for suspicion of homicide...”

“You can bet a lot of things on charity work, Mr. Pierce.”

“What do my paintings have to do with the murders?”

“Then you agree these are your paintings?”

“These are my paintings, which I donate for greater causes, like the preservation of art...”

Morton nodded. “No doubt...but have you noticed anything peculiar with the paintings you donated, especially the last two?”

Pierce exhaled and sat back in his seat. “I can’t imagine a splurge of creativity could possibly collide with the eerie reality of murder and detection.”

“Anything you may be able to imagine, Mr. Pierce can collide in the world of murder and detection. I just want to make sure you understand the implication of this...”

“This seeming cohesion between a painting I made at leisure and the murders some bloody hell killer committed at leisure culminates in the rationalization that I did what?”

“There is, if I may use your word, a case of cohesion not just between a painting and a murder but also of ammunition, more than one, in your home matching the



make and models of at least one of the guns used by the point-blank killer.”

Pierce widened his eyes in shock. He slowly narrowed his eyes at the thought of the insinuation. So ridiculous he thought it, that he could be such on the behest of such and such. “The one killing five in a luxury hotel swimming pool, three in a high-rise motel, and such?”

Morton nodded. “Indeed that...”

Pierce almost voiced a sarcastic laugh, but restrained his senses. “Neither his modes nor manner of killing...or the calling card he leaves behind can be qualified with the phrase, “Point Blank Killer”. What is going on, detective, how is this reasoned?”

Morton shrugged, quickly disguising the fact that he had been struck with something much worse than a normal interrogation procedure while having his intelligence level questioned. “That...and me wondering how in hell you know so much about the case...”

Pierce drew his head back, holding an inescapably sarcastic smile. “You think I had something to do with that?”

“Same make, same model, similar bullets yet to be fully verified,” Morton added with a shrug.

Pierce pulled forward in his seat to hold Morton’s eyes unwaveringly. “I’m going to call my lawyer.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEN

Fun is a far-reaching, far-forwarding abstraction when life decides a confounding point.

Lila felt something strange was happening. And she was too far away to solve the menacing problem. Allen wasn't answering her calls. When he finally did, she reasoned the world had died and gone to hell in a basket full of snakes. And that he had fallen over a stone and died, or her phone was, somehow, processing her phone calls within some empty void at some unimaginable speed without the ability to get through.

Allen laughed at all of it, but he wasn't giving any excuses.

"Where were you, Allen? Strange? Were you working or did you find a new plaything never to last past a second?"

"You can say that differently. I've been nursing, as a matter of speaking, Leigh Pierce."

"Why were you nursing Leigh Pierce?" asked in a concerned tone.

"Morton arrested him on suspicion of murder. I was somewhat thrust into the role of co-counsel for his lawyer in an instant. It's oddly disconcerting."

"I got to the part where he was arrested. For what?"

“The same case we’re working on, a case in point.”

Lila gained silence for a few seconds. “How could this have happened?”

“It didn’t happen. They connected him to the painting I showed you at the Gallery and insinuated he had the same guns as the killer. I know it is—”

“I have something to confess...” she started.

Allen gained silence.

“I went back to the Gallery, asked the manager to tell me who the artist was ... they were donated anonymously, she said...and I couldn’t shake the info out of her...I went to Morton—”

Allen exhaled into the mouthpiece. “You have two days of vacation remaining. Come back home. I can’t discuss this on the phone.”

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Lies come in varieties. There are great lies in the open. There are those, never so great, enlivened in the closet.

Leigh Pierce was not coming out of a fright session. He was living in fright, one more of a dreadful dream than the reality of the fact that he was living in the dream.

Lila was adamant that they didn’t need the presence of a lawyer to demand they see. He had a right to a detective, and her privilege with the local police department, especially Ms. Heimlich and her connections, would get them in. It did.

She and Allen were seated in a private room in the prison premises when Pierce walked in, appearing unlike the man she had met.

He looked grim, as if the world caved in on him, and he was fighting for oxygen amidst nothing but dust. Could he breathe? Lila was worried about him, about his mental health. And so was Allen.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” Allen whispered as Pierce took his seat.

He wore an expression of self-worn self-pity in the room, as if the room wore him inside out.

Alerting the police on the need for the name of the anonymous artwork donor had been beneficial, she reasoned. It was, after all, something endeavored nonchalantly rather than vindictively. Was she a genuine ally at the moment?

“How I have made a terrible decision from innocence, fellows,” he announced dejectedly.

She stared into Pierce’s dejected eyes, unsure of his innocence. What was the probability he was simply the perfect fly she met who had somehow, in the moment, flown too close to the underpass of the sun and wasn’t killed by the intensity of heat alone? How could he now be too close to the sun when the sun cannot be reached without death? The very one of such barely mortal intellectual superliners she had sought advice from on the same case? In her custom of being clear and direct with her clients with regard to what was

achievable and what wasn't, "What you're asking from me is too great, Pierce," she said.

Pierce nodded. "I know it shouldn't be the case in this case, but I need someone to trust on this issue. And I trust Allen. You come highly recommended. Allen trusts you to get to the truth of the matter."

Lila narrowed her eyes. "Even if the pursuit of this truth links directly back to you."

"Especially that," Pierce replied.

The urge to reiterate her position arose in Lila again. "If it turns out you're guilty, I will be working against my own interests in all manner of thinking, doing, and speaking. You know I'm trying to solve this case. Leigh Pierce, if you have any guilt, anything to confess, now is the time to do it."

Pierce held Lila's eyes unwaveringly. "I know it's a great conundrum trying to investigate and...or investigating to defend the suspect in the case you're investigating. However crazy, I am sure you're the right person for this. I implore your help because I cannot sit still in this hellish prison and rot for a crime I did not commit. I did not commit these crimes, Ms. Orileda—"

"My name is Lila, Pierce," Lila interrupted. "We're beyond formalities. There are some dead bodies between us. No easy mystery to solve."

Pierce exhaled. "No doubt, we are. And I will spend every last dollar I have on this because I did not commit these crimes. I cannot trust the police to do it."

“We’re not that expensive,” Allen said, implying Pierce had money and Lila’s services were not overly expensive. He held eyes with Pierce, his friend’s protege.

Lila wondered if he was ruminating about how Pierce could be caught up in the midst of a serial killer case. Was he one of those dear Johns who thinks he’s smarter than everyone but pretends to be nice and decent in society? She was unsure what Allen’s present mood qualified. She did not know him to be an emotional man.

“We’ll take the case,” Allen announced without any consultation with her. He held her eyes gently instead, as if making some silent, urgent plea.

She exhaled, giving her consent.

Pierce caught on to the silent conversation between them. He read her exhalation as consideration. “I’ll tell you everything you need to know, Lila, except confess to a crime I didn’t commit.”

“Tell me about your guns, the ones they say are the same make and models as the guns used in the killings.”

“I bought those guns at the behest rather than mere recommendations of my fellow STS brother,” Pierce replied.

Allen exhaled.

Lila narrowed her eyes. “STS?”

Pierce held eyes with Allen briefly, and Lila watched as Allen nodded in clearance for what he was to say. He held Lila's eyes. "It is an elite society of extreme probabilistic adventures and events within the mortal capacity of the members. A way of living probabilistically outside the regimen of academic life. Anything remotely possible and rational will be scheduled for team exploration..."

"Altogether?" Lila asked.

"Altogether."

"STS?"

"Set Theory Society."

Lila turned to Allen.

He shrugged. "I'm not in it. Fischer is."

Lila squinted. "Tell me you don't have the same guns."

"I have not bought a gun in ages. There weren't such probabilistic secret societies before I graduated. I'm confused." Pierce turned to face Pierce. "I'm much more confused about probabilistic events inside a secret society, Pierce..."

"It's an oxymoronic attempt at life and living...an escape, so to speak. And I am the latest member," Pierce said.

"You're all intellectuals?" Lila asked.

Pierce nodded. "We're all intellectuals...and professors. You have to be a practicing professor to join."

Lila was silenced briefly. "Do all members have the same make and models of the guns as the ones you own.

"Every single member of STS has the same five guns. I'm certain of it."

"How many members are in STS?" Lila asked.

"Five," Pierce replied.

Lila passed him a pen and paper. "They must be known...This is strange. What is the possibility that any of the five of you could have used any of your personal five guns?"

Allen held Pierce's eyes steadily. "It is a five-five."

"One hundred and twenty to one," Pierce replied.

"And the possibility any of you could have used any of the five guns that are not personal to any particular person?" Lila asked.

"That's twenty-five to five," Allen said.

Pierce, meanwhile, indulged in mathematical calculations with the paper Lila gave him.

"That's not what that's for—" Lila complained.

And Pierce stopped.

"Let him," Allen said.

Pierce continued for a few seconds. "6,375,600 to 53,130..."



Lila stared at the numbers and exhaled. "High probabilistic odds do accompany STS Pierce!"

"Staggering, I'll say," Allen added.

Lila narrowed her eyes. "So I suggest you write the names of the five alongside those numbers, or you're sure to rot in prison."

Pierce exhaled loudly. And started to write.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Life screams testimonials while it falters fate. It cannot redeem itself. It cannot. Without dying.

Hank Toner didn't fit the profile. He was handsome and charismatic, a celebrity of some sort. And much of an extrovert who was well sought after by most who came near him. He, she reasoned, probably drew the envy of most of his peers.

Lila had insisted they interview him first because she had never met him.

Allen didn't care for it. He was on the phone with Fischer discussing STS.

And as she entered the office premises, she wondered if he had a prestige over his tenureship.

She took in the immaculately decorated office before she realized she was in his waiting room. Whoever owns the luxurious waiting room was not merely tenured but awfully rich, she concluded. She noticed two office desks in the waiting room. One was occupied by a plain-looking brunette, probably one of his students. The other was empty.

The brunette stood from her plush seat to come towards her with a broad smile. "Good morning, this is Dr. Toner's office. My name is Tiffany Carnes. How may I help you today?"

Her words seemed over-rehearsed, like she was speaking from an answering machine.

"We're here to see him on some important matter. Very important," Lila announced.

Tiffany looked behind her, and Lila realized Allen hadn't followed her in. "He was on the phone informing Fischer about what was happening.

Tiffany engaged Lila's eyes again. "He doesn't see people without an appointment. Do you have a meeting scheduled with him? Should I make one for you?"

"This is very important. We need—"

Tiffany held a spark of recognition in her eyes as she glanced in the direction of the open door.

And Lila knew Allen was off the phone with Fischer and was making his way into the waiting room.

"Dr. Tenser, hello. You came to see Dr. Toner?"

Allen suddenly loomed large in the waiting room through Tiffany's behavioral dictates. "It's important that we see him. Can you inform him we are here?"

Tiffany nodded in the affirmative. "He'll be out of his lecture room in fifteen minutes... take you seats. I'll inform him so he doesn't go elsewhere before he comes back." She walked out of the room.

"I think I needed to be reminded you could be Dr. Tenser if you choose to be referred to that way," Lila said, turning to Allen.

He smiled and shrugged. "I couldn't. I love my job as a Detective," he teased.

She smiled as they took their seats in yet another set of plushy seats. Seated, she raised an eyebrow. "You know Dr. Intellectual Playboy, and you didn't tell me?"

"I don't work in Atlett. I merely schooled here. But I sort of... never left despite my decision not to use my education to work."

She engaged his eyes. "Well now, Detective. I'm going to need you to spill the dish on Mr. Intellectual Celebrity Playboy."

Allen narrowed his eyes. "Are you asking me to gossip with you, Lila?"

Lila smiled. "Gossip for me, Dr. Tenser. Those are the correct terms. You've got to get your propositional dictates in order...so we can gossip some other time..."

Hank Toner was a feastable piece of masculinity, a statue of charisma before her.

Allen introduced the two before Hank told them he had a brief, important meeting and would be back in fifteen minutes.

A freckled-face, red-haired, average-looking man in his late twenties introduced himself as Tom Llyn, Hank's Assistant, and ushered them into another luxurious room.

"The first assistant?" Lila asked.

“The second rank assistant, yes,” Tom replied. “I believe you’ve met Tiffany.”

“I have,” Lila replied as Tom left the office. She faced Allen. “Hank is older than you and never left the Playboy life?”

“He’s forty-three,” Allen replied.

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Life is a scene. Luxury is a stage.

Lila scanned the luxurious office, which was a more startling display than the waiting area. Hank was a hunter, a proud one at that. The hunting memorabilia, gifts, medals of honor, and awards showcased an inhibited passion for the game. There was a large cabinet in the room with a combination lock. And Lila wondered what that was all about. Was there more memorabilia more adequate for peculiar and proximate eyes? Eerie. Was that what she was supposed to feel?

She also knew Hank and Allen couldn’t be close friends. Allen couldn’t be close friends with a celebrity professor. Everything about the man was loud and flashy. And she didn’t know Allen to hunt game.

When Hank came into the office, he did so with the redhead, First Assistant, and the brunette Second Assistant, both of whom were now on either side of her and Allen.

Lila refrained from complaining rudely about Hank having his assistants in the room for their

conversation. She wondered how close he could possibly be with the assistants. And how the closeness, however it may be rationalized, was weird. She engaged eyes with Hank instead and didn't retrieve them.

Allen disengaged his eyes from hers seconds later with the full understanding of what she required. And stared from brunette to redhead before facing Hank, who was seated and seemingly settled in anticipation for their conversation. "This is an important matter, Hank."

"Indeed it is," Lila added. "I'd rather your first and second assistant be out of the room for the discussion."

Hank was silenced briefly, thinking.

Lila wondered at the weirdness of such a consideration.

Without saying another word, with a wave of his hand, Hank dismissed the assistants.

After the door was closed behind them, Lila spoke. "Dr. Toner, it is my belief that you have ammunition."

Hank smiled. "Does that qualify as sarcasm? Asking that of a hunter?"

Lila scanned the office decorations again. And decided the ease of the display could not have been easily gained. "Is my intuition correct that this is more of a family pastime?"

He nodded. "You may call it a genetic link. My father and I indulged, and so did his father before him."

Lila reasoned Hank was the brainchild of STS at that moment. "Dr. Toner, I was informed that you and Leigh Pierce, as well as all other members of STS, possess the same set of five guns."

Hank glanced towards Allen as if requiring reassurances that she was safe to indulge. He slowly turned to face her. "In my case, it would be a set within a set."

"A subset," Lila commented.

"Not quite," he replied.

"A superset?" Lila asked.

Hank smiled. "Depends on perspective."

"Are you always this serious about serious cases, Professor Toner?"

He nodded. "Truly, I can do better."

Lila exhaled. "Sure you do, Professor Toner. Is my information correct that every member of STS has the same subset or superset as you may?"

Hank nodded. "Yes, there is a set of ammunition every member has."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Within the bowels of a strange mystery is sometimes a strange betrayal.

Allen stared at Lila as if the woman were a stranger to him. As far as he knew, she had always had an air of mystery he couldn't escape, one he wished wasn't the case but often resigned to accepting.

The two pairs of eyes in the room, Morton's and Allen's, were on her.

She held eyes with Morton steadily. "What did you say?"

She repeated her statement. "I think you should release Pierce on bail or arrest all members with the guns, all members of STS..."

Morton was largely unmoved by her statement and remained silent for a few seconds. "STS?"

"The Set Theory Society," Lila replied.

Morton hesitated briefly. "They get together, and they do what? Mathematics?"

Lila nodded. "Probabilistic mathematics, to be precise, but they do not sit around to do it. They live by it by doing things, the particulars of which I do not know yet. Whatever it is..."

"Whatever it is?" Morton asked.



Lila shrugged slightly. "Something like that. So I heard. You can ask them for details. Meanwhile, what's important is for you to know Pierce is my client."

Morton laughed. "What?"

Lila continued. "It is my recommendation that you release Pierce because they all have the same make and model, same bullets as the unlikely suspect you arrested."

Morton shook his head. "You're not asking me to release the suspect you led to me because you now represent him, are you?"

She nodded. "That's exactly what I am doing."

"Because you said so?" Morton asked.

Lila shook her head. "No, because I believe in his innocence. I won't retain him as a client otherwise..."

"Yet, you're not a lawyer..."

"But I brought the case your way, or you won't have it at all...I am not asking you to free a criminal. I am asking that he be released on bail, pending whatever you want to throw at him or any other guy out there who is actually guilty..."

"Guilt is not objective...however much—"

"Releasing him strengthens your case...I am certain of it," Lila added.

"And I'll make sure he respects the terms of whatever bail you set," Allen added.

Morton shrugged. "Quite a provision you've got there, Allen."

"Morton," Lila called. "You can't keep him in after the new information."

Morton shrugged. "Why not?"

"Because you can't lock one person away for possible crimes of four others," Lila emphasised.

Morton shrugged. "I don't see what can stop me when he's also the same person who consciously confirmed he is the benevolent artist drawing very similar patterns as the cards. I don't place the five in the same positions, Lila."

Lila shook her head. "You cannot place the gun or guns in his hand, and exclusively in his hands. He has a great lawyer, who, alongside Allen and me, will crucify you."

Morton laughed out loud, sarcastically. "Is that a threat, Lila?"

Lila shook her head. "No, Morton, farthest from it. Why must these relative understandings be threats? They are statements of fact. I know you have an idea...you know how much I hate injustices of any kind. I know how it is to not get justice..."

Morton rolled his eyes.

Lila studied him. "I am merely saying it is the right thing to do without engaging in unnecessary waste of time and taxpayer monies. If you don't give Pierce the chance of the innocent-until-proven-guilty stuff you

preach when you speak your extravagant lies to the unsuspecting press, we-the-people, Allen and I and Preston, and more coming, will make sure you lose this case...”

Allen smiled.

Morton raised his eyebrows and squinted. “When exactly did we-the-people get this power, Lila?”

“Convince me if and when I solve this case before you do, I shouldn’t go to Channel 6 before I come to you.”

Allen shrugged. “You wouldn’t dare have your privileges in the department threatened.”

Lila squinted. “Are you sure I won’t?”

“Is that a threat?” Morton stood. “The chief should hear about this.”

Lila exhaled with reasonable relief at the thought that the chief was going to have the final word. And began to think of ways to manipulate Chief Trate’s possible resolution.

A few minutes later, she and Allen were hurled into the Chief’s office.

Trate faced her. “What is this I hear about you threatening a police officer, Lila?”

“Farthest from it, Chief. I came to Detective Morton before anyone else to save any embarrassment for the department. And encourage proper protocol. There is nothing in this case that my client’s lawyer won’t take

to the next level. Sean Preston is ruthless, and we all know it.”

Trate studied the room and all in it before. “How about Morton investigating the others for the claims of the many guns and ammunition, and once substantiated, Leigh Pierce will be released on bail for further investigation.”

Lila nodded, hiding her excitement. “That sounds splendid, Chief.”

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There is delight in cautionary traces when all is well, and repercussions are in slumber.

“This is a dilemma inside a dilemma,” Lila said to the room of six men.

The room was her office. The notice on the door claimed the office was closed. The room and the array of characters in it could easily mimic a detective-mystery-book-club episode in one of her mystery books. Yet, she couldn’t shake the oddity in the scene. Could she have composed and plotted this?

“The odds are not glorifying or record-breaking,” Allen stated. “There aren’t any higher-order perspectives or narrative for this...”

Fischer bent his back and rubbed his palm against his forehead. “It is not a nebulous matter either. Murder is a basal act... the stuff for savage animals and psychopathic men...worse than that is murder at

random, without desert or causation, much unlike the ideal nature of a true intellectual...”

Fischer’s deep sadness was reflected in his voice, and it was loud and clear in the room. He seemed the most disturbed by the situation, the most emotionally perturbed. And Lila knew in the moment why he was Allen’s closest friend. Allen chose people considerably more emotionally grounded than he is to be friends with for good reasons. He chose her. And they were getting along fine. Could his instincts have betrayed him when he chose Fischer?

Lila scanned the room. She knew Pierce, freshly bailed out of prison and looking pristine and pleased in a well-tailored suit, was the most pleased in the room. He wasn’t willing to speak, not necessarily because of guilt but because he didn’t have to speak. He was the only one officially accused. And he had the right to remain silent.

Fischer spoke again. “The implications of this, direct or indirect, are unimaginable. It is—”

“Oh, Fischer, quit the emotional narrative and get to the point. It is deeply shameful for us all, regardless of who did it.” Hank’s voice was loud and lively, breaking the solemn mood in the room.

Lila wondered if he was always like that. Seemingly uncaring in moments like these? Extending himself as the most important in the room, even in moments like these. “It’s strange, Professor Toner...you’re particularly

emotionally unmoved despite the fact that you're my prime suspect."

Hank shrugged, slightly shocked at the insinuation. "What does that mean?"

"It means what it means," Lila replied sharply.

"It means nothing unless you can prove I did something, Ms. Orileda. And so far, you can't."

Lila narrowed her eyes and studied him for a few seconds. "That can't possibly be something to celebrate while you all stand accused, can it, Professor Toner?"

"Is that contempt I hear in your tone, Ms. Orileda?" Hank asked contemptuously.

Lila did not disengage her eyes from his as she spoke. She had a sense he would overindulge his sense of personal authority if she let him. "Professor Toner, your glory days are over if you don't take the accusation against STS seriously. You misjudged the admonition for contempt."

"As it would be the case if I cannot read the fine print of another's admonition...or contempt..."

"I am not going to go in illogical circles with you, Professor Toner..."

"Then don't, Ms. Orileda. Ask me directly. Indulge me!"

At the sudden behest against reserved caution, her voice was loud and determined. "Are you the Case In Point serial killer we're seeking to apprehend?"

"Are you asking me if I go around killing people at leisure while I retain my admirable Professorship job?"

Lila exhaled. Determined to get an official response, "Yes, Professor Toner, that's exactly what I asked."

"No," was the simple, conclusive answer from Hank.

Lila faced Aron Fischer. "Did you?"

"No," he replied firmly.

Lila faced Jason Deimleich. "Did you?"

"No," he replied gutturally, more resoundingly than his usual basal tone.

Lila faced Ned Trent. "Did you?"

"No," he replied firmly. "Absolutely not," he replied resoundingly.

Lila faced Leigh Pierce. "Did you?"

"Absolutely not!" he replied emphatically.

Lila allowed the concluding silence to linger longer than expected. "Tell me about STS Professor Toner."

Hank narrowed his eyes. "Should I control the narrative?"

"Why would this be a narrative? Set theory is a mathematical theory, a science if I may."

"Relative to this case, it is a narrative," Hank replied.

Lila shrugged. "Could be, other than the relativity to this case, the underlying subject for the case itself? That, as a detective, is what I want to know. Set theory is significantly lacking in advanced mathematics. It is, in fact, elementary. Tell me what I want to know about STS Professor Hank. I couldn't imagine how something as simple as a mathematical theory could become some privileged secret society. Tell me, because I want to know. And it doesn't matter if the information comes from you or not. I must know about this so-called secret society you call STS."

Pierce retrieved his wallet, removed a card, stood and walked over to give it to Lila.

Lila took it and studied it—a distinctively diagrammatic Venn diagram on a white card. The Venn diagram is a formation of two circles with two distinctively marked points on the circles' intersection points, extended with a T imprint lining the midpoint of the lens upward over the circles without being tangential to them. Two S imprints were drawn within the circles on either side of the lens. "STS," she announced.

There were a few seconds of silence.

She continued. "I'm trying to analyse set theory with the Venn diagram. Two intersection points from two circles, which is, so far, logo."

Allen picked up the analytical inclinations. "There is a derivation of three geometric forms out of two. Two circles make a lens... a formative derivation.



“And we must account for this mathematically?”

Allen nodded. “Indeed, we must, Lila. A lens is usually something you look through. But this one is a probability lens.”

Lila raised her eyebrows. “Whatever they can see, they must do. Such, set theory society!”

Allen smiled. “And it could be as it must be, as they are looking through a probabilistic lens, anything.”

Lila exhaled and scanned the room. Hank was laughing off her initial ignorance of the full implications of STS. Ned Trent held a slight smile. The others had no serious expression. Were they reserved out of some level of grief? “There is a realistic application for mathematical interpretation for this society.”

Allen nodded. “Yes. Three geometric formations from two, and the odds ratio and axial ratio must come into play.”

Lila exhaled. “But there is something else, something else not easily palpable...Let’s talk geometry...”

Hank nodded in agreement. “Please, Ms. Orileda. Indulge me...”

“You say it is the formation of 3 geometric formations from 2.”

“Yes,” Hank replied.

“And to have the intrinsic deduction that makes up the set theory society, it cannot afford another geometric formation?”

He nodded. “It cannot, or it will lose its current value and meaning. The setup will fall apart.”

“There is the congruency to account for despite probabilistic resolutions. It is problematic. In architecture, for instance, these are used for the precision and rigidity in structural frameworks. Yet the lens is probabilistic. Then there must be some degree of change applicable for this to be probabilistic. Yet I find the only means of change is vertical through the T relative to the lens. There are no tangents against a curvature. There is, on the other hand, a towering seemingly non-moving T. like a stem or a rock. I am yet to find the probabilistic events fueled by the set theory formation,” Lila explained.

“A towering non-moving T?” Hank asked.

Lila nodded. “Let me say it like this. Is there a way to connect the vertical in the lens to a curvature on the two circles?”

Hank hesitated briefly, thinking. “Yes, I believe there is. This is geometry after all.”

“If there is, it is a hugely problematic one. We’re going to have a new geometric formation, one with two curves limited by a line and intersected by a vertical line in between. It can, at best, be resolved as two

triangles against the point. A new geometric formation, I'll say. Would you agree, Professor Toner?"

Floored by his own arrogance in the meantime, Hank was floored and hesitated briefly. "I can not limit this agreement Ms. Orileda."

"Then the Towering T is a misnomer, especially in designation. It is not tied to change or movement except in a lower-than-eye-level lens. Change, that is, imagined as such, merely from the mind of the beholders. Are you still in agreement that a new formation deconstructs both the value and meaning?"

"I am," Hank replied.

"Then STS is a non-realizable, non-realistic, improbable but possible probabilistic artificial environment."

"The logic for that is fuzzy," Hank commented.

"It is worse. It is if and only not-if," Lila added. The consequence cancels the precedent and gives a nonentity for a non-reality. It is the changeable non-reality that can tangent the curvatures, a non-presence driving in an automatically driven car, a headless factor that could navigate probabilistic change is overshadowed and made unrealistic by a towering T. It is a moving detached head with an unmoving body, a headless non-biome..."

"And..."

"It is also non-biometric..." Lila added.

"And..."

"Someone could be reimagining your STS to make you look stupid, Professor Hank," she added.

The room was silent briefly. `

"There are other aspects to consider—" Allen announced.

Lila interrupted him. "Before reconsideration, Dear Allen, there is one more thing on the subject I want Professor Toner to consider."

"What could that be Ms. Orileda?"

"With regards to STS and mathematical congruency. It seems STS is saying two plus two is T...which we both know is mathematically incorrect because there is only one T—"

Hank shrugged. "It is also saying two plus two is three... under probabilistic terms, and the applicable and optimising terms for STS, two plus two is exactly T or three...Does that satisfy your curiosity Ms. Orileda?"

Lila wondered if she could ever be pleased with his arrogance. "That will be sufficient for now, Professor Toner..."

"That said..." Hank started. "If you'll indulge me, Allen, before you continue with reconsiderations. Ms. Orileda proposed something absurd. Let's explore the possibility someone is trying to outpace my STS dictates."

"Is it so absurd, Professor Toner?" Lila asked.

"It's suspiciously ludicrous Ms. Orileda."

Then Lila relaxed the muscles of her shoulders, realising his insinuations did not come from a place of pride but rather the possibility of proximal dread. "Then it could be someone you know...someone who dislikes you..."

"Or envy me?"

"Or it could be someone whose wife or girlfriend he slept with because he wanted to and could," Pierce added.

"Someone who hates him for his seldom but famous hints of I-know-it-all," Ned added.

"Or someone he cut off in traffic and gave the middle finger because he is the renowned Nutty Professor," Pierce added.

"Or it could be any of you," Hank said in a low, assured tone.

And the room gained silence.

"It could be anyone..." Lila stated.

"Yet it could be my very best buddies from STS, who love and hate me with the same tenacity..." Hank said.

"That said. The main issue at this point, as Lila gets more entrenched in these narratives, is that you all want to be represented by the agency," Allen said.

Lila widened her eyes. "All of you?"

Allen gave her a nudge as she considered the money they could make. "I know the two of us as detectives can handle the case for all of you."

But Lila was more concerned about how and in what form she would get paid for her now growing efforts for the very same case. "If I represent all of you, I will be paid for every individual represented and not for the group."

"We have an STS fund accrued from speaking gigs," Pierce said.

Hank shot him an angry glance.

"Then we have an agreement on the nature of the payment," Lila said.

"Yes," Pierce, who was already paying her, replied.

"All in agreement say yes," she demanded.

They echoed the yeses one after the other, but she was more determined to get a pronounced response from Hank. "Professor Toner?"

Hank's doubt was resolved with the consent of every other member of STS. "Yes," he voiced without a trace of reservation in his tone.

Lila allowed the silence in the room to linger for a while before speaking. "I require a level of honesty here because this is a house of cards. If one of you goes down, all of you go down somewhat, in some mode or fashion. If one of you is guilty, it is my job to figure out

who so all others can have a semblance of their lives back. Are we all in agreement?"

The echo of yesses was spontaneous this time.

"I think we should analyse possibilities within possibilities," Allen announced.

"I think we should analyse the ratios," Lila announced.

"The anatomy of two becoming three for STS does not come from a point, it comes from two in this probabilistic ecosystem..."

"What are you trying to say Ms. Orileda?" Hank asked.

Lila faced Hank. "I think if we combine all the intellectual minds in this room, we should be able to figure out how and maybe why someone determined to undermine STS could come up with a point on a blank and start killing people to undermine the vision, premise and membership of STS."

The room retained silence briefly.

"Something's got to give, or we risk beyond the pride or maybe prejudices of STS," Lila announced.

"Prejudices?" Hank asked.

She shrugged. "Merely assumed."

"Ill apparent prejudices are hardly what we should be resolving at the moment, Lila. Sentiments do not solve cases," Allen complained.

"With regards to the ratio," Allen started. "Odds or otherwise axial—"

Lila frowned. “The oddity? The axis?”

“We’re getting to a point,” Allen replied and locked eyes with Lila.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Conundrums degenerate on the path of genuine existence. They deteriorate into a regression sink and fall off bloated, an empty lapse, a memory failure, a lack of coordination, and inferior sensations in spatiotemporal reality.*

*Lila stared at her assailant as if he were a simpleton dot, a dense collection of nincompoop material. She was resigned to whatever power he thought he had to kill her through his criminal invasion of her life in her own home. But her thoughts were strictly hers. Why was the lowlife spending time with her when she should be dead or left by now? She, after all, could not pray for death faster than she could evade it. And no one truly has power over death.*

*Why was he lingering here, spending most of her seemingly last moments alive with her? She restrained herself from psychoanalyzing the situation. That would be a waste of her last moments. Most sociopaths and psychopaths are not salvageable anyway. She had taken her time cooking the food he forced her to cook.*

*As she took her seat across from him with her plate and retrieved her spoon, she could feel his eyes on her.*

*"Uhn...uhn," he scolded, waving his fingers in front of his face.*

*She squinted, disbelieving she was being forced to be in close proximity with and eat with the fool.*

*He held her eyes steadily. And she wondered what he held in contempt in her mannerisms. Did he want her to do something? She remained silent, unsure whether whatever she uttered next would not be rude or superficially insolent to warrant physical assault.*

*“We must say the Lord’s prayer,” he announced.*

*She remained silent.*

*He continued. “Dear God, your graces abide with us in less and in plenty as a wife should abide with her husband. Lila and I are grateful for the provision of this food and the company of each other. We’re thankful. Amen.”*

*She remained silent and in shock. He knew her name. Had he seen her name on one of her mails? Or had he done his due diligence, stalking and getting to know his intended victim?*

*He widened his eyes as a means of generating a scolding expression she believed failed in its attempt. Was that some sense of guilt coming out of the prayer or something else entirely?*

*“Amen,” she said.*

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*A tower of oddity is like a house of cards—no tenacity for a stance.*

Allen scanned the room again. "We must get to the possibility of the point.

"Like you may imagine a point outside the perimeter of the Venn diagram?" Pierce asked.

"As you may imagine, a single point of intersection between two circles, for instance," Allen replied.

Hank frowned. "A single probabilistic data point?"

"Then we can reimagine the probabilistic field," Allen said.

"It is no longer a field," Hank said.

"Let's get to oddity...Oddity..." Lila started. "...the probability of an event divided by the probability of no event."

Allen nodded. "And it is usually a quick view into what may be going on relative to the lens, which looks more like a third eye of conception. It—"

Lila shook her head. "Not of conception."

"Of Perception," Allen corrected.

"Not of Perception," Lila disagreed.

"What could it be Ms. Orileda?" Hank asked.

"Of concoction. Whatever it is you can imagine, you project onto the lens. Allen imagines its conception and perceptions because he imagines the lens is real and therefore the relativity you hold with the imagination is real as well—"

“Probabilistic events are real,” Hank argued.

Lila shrugged. “Sure, but they are first imagined before they can be probabilistic. And as we discussed earlier, Professor Toner, they are not moving.”

“Then we can imagine the axial ratio,” Allen announced.

“There is no realistic arc formative with the Venn,” Lila announced. “Long or short, events or no events, and the single point does not have any measurable height... and the probability is longer in the Venn. Either way, the shorter length is found in making 3 from 2, and the longer length is in the 3. Therefore, relative to the axial approximation we invert, we get 1.5. It couldn't be what draws the real probability sequence, which is 2 divided by 3, could it, Professor Toner? It couldn't be 0.6666666666 to infinity, could it?”

“You're dissecting from a thin perspective Ms. Orileda. These—”

“Let's dissect further,” Lila interrupted. “Then, if we both agree that there is probably someone out there undermining you and your flamboyant—”

“Flamboyant?”

“Have you seen your office, Professor Toner?” Lila asked wide-eyed. “Such, I imagine if your extravagance and pride reject someone, or as they say, slept with someone's wife...”

“Who says?” Hank asked wide-eyed.

Allen smiled. “Gossip is not admissible...”

Lila smiled. "Okay, maybe not...but there is a probability someone has figured this out differently, beyond the pride club, and has taken things beyond the probability lens...He puts the 3 below the 2 and goes on a murder rampage. After all, with 1.5 and 0.6,  $1+5$  is 6, and 6 divided by 0.6 is 10. Then what could be the steepest irony here...What are the odds of the serial killer killing people for no reason, or any one good reason, being one of the STS members? What number or set of numbers are next to be killed?"

The room gained silence.

"That will be odd to answer, Lila," Fischer said. "What do you think the odds are here?"

"51 to 49, I'll say at this point," Lila replied.

Allen rubbed his fingers against his nose. "Here, I will make a cogent point that the odds the serial killer is one of you or came from you is 100 percent."

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A fabricated labyrinth is a certain graveyard only a lifetime of reality may undo.

"That's a first," Lila commented as Morton came into her office. Can't say a nice surprise without you calling first. Are my services proven overly efficient and proficient to deserve your presence, Detective Morton?"

"Merely sufficient," Morton replied.

Lila shrugged. "Well then. How may I help you, Detective?" she asked in a teasing, self-assured tone."

"You can't help me, Lila. That's not what I am here for," Morton replied.

"I can't imagine your presence here at all," Lila replied.

"You should have. You're having meetings with my clients behind my back."

Lila raised an eyebrow. "Behind your back? I can't imagine your back within any proximal length of my social circle, certainly not in my professional office at the moment. Yet here you are, uninvited, in need of my help and pretending otherwise."

He shook his head slightly. "I'm not pretending to be in need of your help, Lila, because I don't have to. You're directly interfering with my investigation by conferring with my suspects without my presence."

Lila snickered lowly. "Do you mean the suspects I brought your way?"

"You can't deliver the devils and try to save them at the same time. That's not how things work."

Lila squeezed the muscles on one side of her face. "Whatever could I be trying to salvage here. But the devils themselves?"

He was not amused. "Is this some sick game you're playing?"

"Did you barge into my office uninvited because you wanted to know what we discussed?"

He hesitated briefly, unsure what her instincts implied. "You're current. I would like to know what you were discussing with my suspects."

Lila twisted her mouth in a dramatic manner and stared unflinchingly at him. "Detective Morton, you know I cannot help you with that. You cannot compel me on such terms, but by means of the procedural law we're both familiar with. I have a lawyer. And I am certain they've all retained lawyers. The lawyers may agree to be interrogated."

Morton narrowed his eyes. "So the answer is no?"

She didn't respond.

"I'm onto your every move," he announced.

She shrugged. "If you weren't doing that, Detective, you should have. Unfortunately, I don't kiss and tell unless I must necessarily tell."

He frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It's a metaphor for this situation. If you know I am working for justice regardless of who did it, and I brought you the suspects, why would I cover it up when you know my efforts will benefit you eventually?"

"It better be Lila," Morton said as he left the room. "It better be."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There is no terminal point for glorious indignity. The ant cannot contain it. Neither can the elephant. But the subtle essence of ingloriousness is the infinity inside the belly of an act.

Morton was eating nuts and staring at Hank, who was reading a book he had requested from his lawyer. His words upon arrest were, "I'm calling my lawyer." He didn't say another word. Morton had basically talked to himself for over half an hour with a non-responsive, self-assured professor who was now reading a book in the presence of his lawyer.

He decided to get himself some nuts as snacks because that was what he felt like getting after obtaining nothing from Hank, and was informed his firm of choice was *Preston and Associates*.

Sean Preston, the average-looking, highly influential lawyer in his sixties, showed up in person looking great in his tailored suit. And he did all the answering for Hank. Such a high and mighty episode, he thought, on behalf of Hank. Were they friends? There was such a quiet understanding between them, a solemn unspoken mannerism advising him that Hank could afford to be as removed from the situation as he chose. And it was eventually evident why he endured the experience while reading a book. Preston was in the room to inquire about the mode and nature of the



arrest. And when he got to ask for them, there was an unmistakable shift in interest in Hank.

“Morton,” Preston called. “You know we’re both too old and too experienced to beat around a burning bush. These dances we do are simple, really, aren’t they? We do like to make common folks think there is more than what’s there. There are five people in this case, and they are involved with the same set of five guns. My firm has now been chosen twice to represent two of them on the same case—”

“Because they have class and money...” Morton commented.

Preston nodded. “I agree with that, and those are not crimes and can’t make anybody a criminal. I also know you know I am not one to waste my time... or have my time wasted...”

“Big shots have too much time not to waste any...”

Preston shook his head. “You like going the wrong long run with interrogations...anyone who knows you knows it...so stop speaking this unproductive language, Morton...Must I compel information...Or will we share information I must one way or another get to have?”

Morton peered from attorney to client, focused on the client briefly before turning back to face the attorney. He resolved to an open leeway. “You’re always entitled to those, Preston. But I want a few questions answered...”

The attorney and the Detective both assumed the brief silence in the room connoted the resolve.

Preston spoke. "Why...after ballistics, firearm, and toolmark examinations were performed, is my client the only person arrested?"

Morton was silenced briefly at the matter-of-fact, unambiguous question.

Preston side-eyed him. "You did do those before making this arrest, did you not, Detective?"

Morton relaxed in his seat. And resolved to the possibility that he wouldn't get to interrogate Hank. He gave a mental summary of the encounter before he spoke again. He resolved that Hank didn't come off as cold-blooded. He, however, seemed aloof and detached in the moment. He was the most uncaring innocent-until-proven-guilty criminal he had ever met.

"Morton," Preston called to get his attention in the moment.

Morton raised his eyes to meet Preston's. "The ballistics came back pinpoint positive for his set of ammunition alone."

The room gained silence briefly.

And when the questions promised were tendered so the lawyer could defend the professor, Morton faced Hank to ask for it. "Professor Toner, it is important that I ask you if, based on this information, you were not the only member of the five who could have participated in

these crimes? Did any other member of the five participate in the killings for which you are being accused?"

Preston held eyes with Hank, who, in turn, shook his head.

"No," Preston said.

Morton scratched the tip of his nose, narrowing his eyes simultaneously. "Professor Toner, this is a question I must ask, and you must answer, through your lawyer or otherwise. You can write down the answer on paper if you want. Did you kill any of the people in the Point-Blank Case, too many to mention, and leave a point on a blank card as your signature?"

Preston held eyes with Hank. And his answer was to shake his head vehemently.

Preston turned to face Morton. "A vehement no."

\*\*\*\*\*

Aesthetics have no moral dictate. What harm befalls you in its presence is of your own making.

Allen had argued that everyone deserved death or redemption, depending on their preemption for change, justice, or atonement. And maybe a second chance, he argued. Whatever happened to her innocent-until-proven-guilty mantra? Was that just a mantle piece or a genuine belief system?

But she was now a skeptic. Allen's friends, however good they were for her social circle, prestige, and

career, had a knack for getting arrested. Had he put too much undeserved faith in his friends?

Hank looked groomed, slightly unkempt relative to his normal presentation. But unlike Pierce, the last time they visited the prison, he appeared untroubled. She wondered if there was some micro-definitive trait for sociable psychopathy in the DSM analytical tray of deviations. Weren't we all victims of psychopathy, she pondered.

"I have a rather base attempt at decorum," Hank announced.

Rather thoroughly basal, I'll say," Lila commented.

"Don't run away with the obvious, Ms. Orileda. I am not guilty of the crimes for which I have been accused and arrested."

Lila remained silent.

"Everyone is innocent until proven guilty," Allen said.

"Lila and I had a discussion regarding that very issue."

"Maybe Ms. Orileda believes the inverse may be adequate. Do you, Ms. Orileda?"

"Oh, Professor Toner, don't patronise me!" Lila exclaimed. "We're here to help you at your own behest. Let's start with how many women you're sleeping with who may possibly have some kind of grudge and want you to fail?"

Hank held Lila's eyes fully. "I can't do that?"

“Why not?” Lila asked in a slightly sexualized mocking code.

“I think you’re onto the reason,” Hank encouraged.

Lila’s eyes widened. “You don’t think any of them are smart enough to correct your STS projections!”

Hank turned to Allen. “Allen, why are you hiding Ms. Orileda from me?”

Allen raised his eyebrows. “I couldn’t do that if I tried.”

“She’s difficult?” he asked.

“What the hell...” Lila voiced.

Hank finally faced her.

“Maybe it’s because you’re not my type,” she insinuated.

He shrugged. “Why would you imply romance, Ms. Orileda. Women easily make the assumption that all the reason a man can want to know them is romance and sex.”

“It’s unfortunate that, unlike the girls you date, Allen and I can figure these things out,” she stated.

Hank nodded in agreement. “Unfortunate indeed. So I was indeed correct. Allen Tenser is hiding you.”

There was silence in the room, briefly.

Lila spoke. “Back to the issue at hand. “If the girls... according to you...unintelligent girls you’re sleeping with...many of them...”

“Yes, many of them...”

Lila felt a rise of nausea but braced herself to continue. “If we assume that many of them couldn’t presume your intelligence to supersede them, we may assume they, or anyone else, may have access to your guns...where do you keep your guns...”

Hank’s eyes suddenly had a glimpse of the gravity of his situation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Possibilities are endless as long as the reality is insolvent.

Allen cleared her out of her office so the digital and technological sweeping crew could do their jobs.

“It’s important that we sweep...digital...physical,” he finally told her in the waiting room.

But she was always onto his very simple instincts. They bore the heaviest telltale signs. “Are you going to tell me why?” she asked. And wondered how the intelligent stranger had worked his way into her trusting him almost completely, trusting his instincts even when the ends were not apparent to her. He trusted hers as well, immensely.

“After the sweep,” he replied.

“How do you get these people?” she asked.

He smiled. “I went to school at Atlettt.”

“You sure did,” she replied.

And as soon as they finished with her office, he pulled her into her office and closed the door behind him. He was as close to her as he could get before he whispered. "We have to close the cheating scandal case."

She narrowed her eyes, studying him. "Why are we whispering?"

"I'm being overly cautious," he replied.

"Why must we close the case?" she whispered back.

He raised an eyebrow. "Must we not?"

She twisted her mouth. "But why must we, Allen, why must we?"

"We must," he replied. "We're dealing with shady characters."

"Aside from the KKK?"

"Aside from the KKK."

She gained silence for a few seconds, thinking. "Then I will inform Mrs—"

"We can't end it that way," Allen interrupted.

Lila frowned. "Why not?"

"A resolution marks an ending."

"So does a termination."

"Does it? Or does it create tension?"

Lila exhaled and studied the man she had come to respect and trust. She walked towards her office table to take her seat.

He took his seat as well.

“How do we close this case?” she asked.

“We go beyond the normalized strategies,” he replied.

“How far?”

“You remember Robbie?”

Lila exhaled sharply. Robbie was a man of several trades, especially those that were illegal. He knew how to get such jobs done. He also knew how to keep his mouth shut. Had gone to jail for a case without giving up his accomplices. And after his release had become a bona fide source for all such works that must be done as an illegal means to a worthy cause, at least in her view. They had used him before, once. But any continual need for his services frightened her. “No, I don’t remember Robbie.”

Allen smiled. “I know you do, Lila.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Who is Robbie again?”

“We need him here.”

“In what way?” she relented.

Allen exhaled. “He can get one of the workers in to implant—”



Lila was on her feet instantly, staring down at Allen, who was now quite uncomfortable in his seat. “You’re joking, right?”

He stood as well, intent on finishing his sentence. “Once this occurs, we can doctor the background—”

“Your joke is compounding, Allen,” she said.

“Nobody is laughing here, Lila. I need you to trust me because only I will take a fall if anything happens. I promise. And no matter what Mrs. Cook gets, what she gets is what is true. We should close this case definitely as soon as we can to put it behind us.”

Lila took her seat again and relaxed back into her seat.

He exhaled and took his seat, holding her eyes steadily.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

There is a copious disdain for time in the rendition that time flies.

Tom Llyin's freckled face painted a youthful exuberance—a man in his early thirties stuck in the body of a teenager. Everyone grows, Lila thought. But beyond the illusions of time is the realistic consequence of murder.

They were in Hank's office, and she knew he had issued the directives minutes before she arrived, as she instructed.

Lila forced a smile. She couldn't help it. The man's innocent boyish looks couldn't escape her. Could he then be a serial killer? "You know Professor Toner's schedule very well, don't you, Mr. Llyin?"

Llyin nodded. "Sure, I am his first assistant."

"How is the relationship between you and Professor Toner?" she asked.

Allen came into the office at the moment with three bottles of water and set them down on the table. He turned the luxurious chair around to face Llyin before taking his seat.

She faced Llyin again. "How is that relationship?"

"Professional," Llyin replied.

Lila didn't want to waste time on worthless conversations. "That's what you call good enough, I suppose..."

Llyn nodded. "That you may rightfully suppose, Ms. Orileda. Decent, I'll say."

Lila wondered if the cordiality between the supposed intelligent scholar and the admired Professor was all too real. "Do you know where Professor Toner keeps his guns?"

"It depends."

"It depends on what?"

"It depends on what sets of guns you're referring to."

"The guns he uses for his STS activities."

Llyn pointed towards the locked cabinet in the office. "He keeps them there."

She exhaled, soon coming to a quick decision not to inquire about his private life. She had ordered background checks on both Ms. Carnes and Mr. Llyn through the police department. The current relationship with the department did not come without a cost, and she was determined to see it to the end, milking it for all she could get. Besides, she didn't want to make Llyn uncomfortable—or have him thinking some suspect was still at large.

Morton had shrugged at the thought, complaining that, unlike her, he had too much work to do. He was tired of her indecision, however much she was helping. She

was on her own. When she had something. She should call him. As far as he was concerned, the Playboy handsome professor had done himself in.

Meanwhile, he was too certain of the Professor's convictions. He didn't hurt to knock him down a peg or two or nine. Morton found it fun to have been able to arrest Hank. Without expressing his extreme and high dislike for the man, "Forensics don't lie," he simply maintained.

But do Forensics lie? Especially when they are not direct and biological? Lila wasn't too sure. She wanted to dot her i's and cross the T's in the case. The case was still unresolved for her. The big I, after all, could not be dotted. She craved simplification.

Mrs. Castle had been informed that her efforts had led to two arrests, but she reassured the woman that Morton was more instinctive than cautious. He made arrests because he had the authority to do so. Lila further assured Mrs. Castle that she wouldn't come to her until she was certain whoever killed her son was behind bars.

"Do you have the combination for the lock?" she asked Llyn.

"Tiffany and I both have all the keys relevant to our work at all times."

Lila frowned. "Why would you have such a thing as the keys to the guns in the gun cabinet?"

“Professor Toner likes to use our help outside the jurisdiction of academic responsibilities.”

Lila frowned. “You socialize with him?”

Llyin hesitated briefly. “Socialization is also an aspect of academic life...but this is more in the realms of servitude mated with socializing. It is a privilege to help him achieve his aims, to be seen with him, and to take photos with him. I carry the bags and the guns while he hunts, for instance. But he wins the award.”

“Santa’s helpers as such?”

“Indeed that.”

Lila hesitated briefly, collecting her thoughts. “Mr. Llyin...have you...at any point in time outside the protocols of this servitude and socialization, as you put it, opened the gun cabinet and taken any gun out for a joyride or something like it...?”

“Never.”

“But you could have, if so you had the opportunity and chose to...”

“Sure, but...”

“But...Mr. Llyin...?”

Llyin cleared his throat. “Professor Toner had tests of loyalty beyond normal comprehension. I’m sure the reason I am the first assistant is that I have passed most of the tests where others failed.”

Lila frowned, wondering what the full implications of his words were. "What are you trying to tell me, Mr. Llyin?"

"I am not certain there isn't a hidden surveillance system in his office."

Lila exhaled. "One last thing, Mr. Llyin...If you didn't go outside the protocols of your employment, do you know of anyone else who could have access?"

"Aside from Tiffany, the second assistant, I know of no one else."

\*\*\*\*\*

Intelligence is an asylum for the uncommon.

Tiffany Carnes was a plain-looking brunette. And her plainness, Lila assumed, was entrenched in more than just her appearance. She was the unassuming one anyone could easily overlook, except for her academic achievements. Nevertheless, her academic achievements could not be written on her forehead.

Lila studied her. Allen and Hank had written Tiffany off as a possible serial killer. It was such a daring and uncaring crime, and it had male DNA written all over it, Allen had argued. And so she decided he would not be present for the questioning. He agreed.

Lila, too, at the unseemly sight of Tiffany with her plain and innocent looks, almost gave up on the thought instantly. She further assured herself that the serial killer could be one of a twosome or a group. The

assistants could be working together to undermine their boss. But thus far, she hadn't found much to the kill-on-character possibility outside the womanizing, prideful, rude, and boisterous attitude Hank was known for. Who kills for that, randomly? How could that be worth killing innocent people for? She decided to deviate from asking personal questions with Tiffany as well. These are people neither she nor Allen truly knew. It was an absolute fact that she had access to the STS guns? What are the odds she took the opportunity? Same as the odds, she was the serial killer of nine? "Ms. Carnes, Mr. Llyin tells me you have access to the guns in the cabinet inside this office. Is that true?"

She nodded. "All assistants have keys to everything in the office. Yes."

"Do you know why? Mr. Llyin couldn't particularly give me a good answer."

"He likes to socialize a lot and be seen, and wants to make sure everything he isn't here for gets done by us."

"That makes some sense...Have you, Ms. Carnes, without the behest of Professor Toner, retrieved any gun from the gun cabinet in this office for any reason?"

"No," she said firmly, without a moment's hesitation and without a flinch.

Lila studied her unreadable demeanor and wondered if she was always so stoically professional. "Do you know anyone other than Mr. Llyin, who could have?"

For the first time, Tiffany hesitated, lowering her eyes briefly before holding Lila's again. "He could have given a key to one of his many girlfriends."

\*\*\*\*\*

The suds of vices run down deep into a shallow drain. Within three days of the implants, Allen walked into her office with a smile.

"It's done," he announced.

And Lila knew instantly. "Where?"

"The Nanny's bedroom. X-rated."

Lila raised her brows. "Stuff that can get me arrested, aside from losing my licence."

He shook his head. "Things that will never see the light of day."

"Are there some PG-13 versions?"

Allen dropped a couple of pictures on the table.

Lisa picked them up and widened her eyes. "Where did the doctored background come from?" she asked.

"The backyard," he replied. "So bad, the couple won't even be able to tell they didn't do it."

"I'll close it."

\*\*\*\*\*

It is eternally impossible to supersede in an environment in which one owns no existence.



Morton was on his way out of the precinct with a crew of two when Lila walked in.

“Detective Morton,” she called. “We have to interview the assistants.”

Morton turned to face her with a frown. “I have a murder-suicide on my hands, Lila. Why would we do that now?”

“You’re eventually going to need to do that because the defense will do that if you don’t get to it. You have to make sure no one else made use of that gun but the suspect.”

He studied her briefly. “You can do it, Lila. I’ll have Tucker assist you. You’re not fully official yet, so tread carefully.”

“I will,” she replied.

Allen was excited for her. “Kind of how I got to be your partner.”

Lila nodded. “Kind of. But just like you. I’ll never officially work for them. They’re unofficially working for me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

There is a fatal remedy for unspirited strife. It infinitely extends its alibi.

Detective Tucker Wilson, second in rank to Morton, had dark hair and a dull, quiet face. He was what Morton wasn’t. More importantly, he was more agreeable. She

was glad to be working with him rather than Morton on the case.

They were in Morton's office, with Morton having gone on some more important cases for the moment. He figured, erroneously or otherwise, they had solved the case with Hank's arrest. Lila couldn't change his mind.

After briefing Wilson on the case and hearing him promise to catch up on the files over the weekend, Lila realized she didn't really need his input as much as she needed the forensic ability the police department was capable of. "Detective. Wilson, this case cannot afford to have DNA forensics. There aren't any. All there are are guns and more guns. It is all bloody Holy Mary...I'm sure you understand. It is that evidence without any direct evidence, if you may...and no genetic compatibility match can be made because it is inevitably, let's say, Y-deficient? That is, in physics, you may call it a parallel enigma, a one-way she-said-she-said on a one-way plane. Planes are usually two ways, Detective Wilson..."

Wilson slowly nodded. "I will do anything within this Department's power to assist you in any way, Ms. Orileda."

Lila slowly nodded, having heard the needed assurances. "I need any and all video or images taken anywhere around the locations of the three incidents, and I need them in the highest definition available. I also need them to be clear. I need clearance on all digital possibilities for the three incidents."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*There is a rawness to traumatic experience foreshadowing our progression and circumventing them all the same.*

*She had comforted herself by viewing him as an idiot. He had indulged her with the worthless prayer over God's provision of food. The man's intelligence was inevitable. She knew the type. Why was he keeping her engaged in seeming domestic tasks and seeming unintelligent acts?*

*She was light on her feet, unable to eat, overwhelmed with the fear he was going to kill her, and unwilling to show it.*

*"Oh, Darling, you hardly ate your food, not hungry?" he asked.*

*"I ate before I went to bed," she said, almost holding her breath.*

*He sat upright in his chair. "Well. now it's time to clean up..." He pushed his empty plate towards her. And watched as she picked it up alongside hers towards the kitchen sink.*

*He followed her towards the sink and dumped the knives he had spread out on the table into the kitchen sink. He hovered over her afterwards, his gun touching her spine.*

*She began to wash the knives. And slowly started setting the knives aside for the doubts that flashed a measure*

*beyond pain in her head that there was a high likelihood he was going to kill her.*

*He began to kiss her neck. And moaning.*

*She tried her luck at survival by pulling the knives out of the pool of water to place them on the flat Kitchen counter. After positioning the third knife, she unexpectedly thrust one of the blades toward him, scarcely penetrating his skin. She'd aimed for his heart. But his reactions directed her to his upper chest. With the blade just lodged, she dashed away from him, into her living room, to escape her home.*

*But he was stronger than she imagined. In a fury from behind, he grabbed onto her neck harshly, pulled her back, and threw her head against her kitchen wall. She was out immediately.*

*Half-naked, beaten to a pulp, bloodied beyond dread, and left for dead that Friday morning on her Kitchen floor, Bella, in due course for their Friday morning breakfast because Lila worked remotely on Fridays, found her.*

*Two puncture wounds were found in her spine, where a knife held between the handcuffs he used to hold her unconscious body by the neck against a wall lingered too uncaringly against the thoracic T1-T2 and lumbar T1-T5.*

*The doctors were sure she was lucky to have survived and fully regained her motor neural functions.*

*Lila, who had slowly and painstakingly watched herself heal to regain her life against the odds, knew it with*

*absolute resolve—luck had nothing to do with her survival.*

\*\*\*\*\*

It is a dribble to go around in a daze following a pain-ridden hedonistic festival.

Rebecca Cook gave it a cry the instant she saw the photographs. She was no longer the uncaring, cheating wife Lila thought she had on her hands. She was the inconsolable mourning wife.

Lila wondered if she was correct in assuming she still had feelings for her husband. And took the photographs from her, devising instead a less emotionally charged approach in the meantime. “Mrs. Cook, I’m not going to let you have these photographs just yet...”

Cook held Lila’s eyes through her tear-filled eyes. “But why not...I paid for them...”

“I know, but not everything we pay for is meant to be kept...I tell you what...how about we try this simple method, and we’ll see how it goes...” Lila stood and walked over to the client seat to put a comforting hand on the woman’s shoulder. “The woman he’s having an affair with is Steve Clark’s Nanny...”

“His best friend’s Nanny, oh my God...”

Lila allowed the woman to break into another round of self-pitying sobs. She thought the woman was stronger than that. She thought the woman was Gangsta. She

could have sworn the woman she first met would never break down sobbing. "Mrs Cook, her name is Edena Lopez...how about you confront him with what you know, and maybe everyone else close knows...maybe he will confess and give you whatever you want then...You want to try that...?"

The woman picked up the nose tissues on the table and wiped her nose. "I'll try that...but if it doesn't work...I'm coming right back..."

"I'll be here," Lila said softly.

\*\*\*\*\*

The inner workings of a question mark face oblivion in the quiet working of a functioning mind.

She went in with Sean Preston to ensure the conversation was private. He was scheduled. She wasn't. But Hank made seeing her essential. She had some time with him before he could have the privilege of his attorney. It was essential that she see him.

The three sat quietly for a few seconds before she spoke. "You look worse than the last time I saw you."

"I am counting on you to make me Handsome again, Ms. Orileda," he said, in a restrained, cautious tone.

"I am counting on your truth and honesty to make sure I am not wasting my time, Professor Toner. "

"I am sure you're not Ms. Orileda...Why did you have to see me in person? You're starting to find my company attractive?"

Lila smiled. "I doubt that would ever happen...but I have a feeling Ms. Carnes wasn't so fortunate..."

Hank exhaled sharply.

"You didn't?" Lila asked.

"Why are you jumping the gun, Ms. Orileda? Do you want me to answer the question or not?"

But Lila seemed resolved that the answer would be in the affirmative. "You didn't?"

"I did," came the sullen, inevitable response.

Lila couldn't scold the man in front of his lawyer as much as she wanted to.

"Did she tell you?" he asked, frowning. "That's unlike her."

She nodded in agreement. "It is indeed unlike her. She didn't tell me. I deduced it...the only time she had a hint of emotionality in her voice was when she told me any of your many girlfriends could have had the key to the gun cabinet."

"Why did you do it? Surely you can have an ounce of control over a plain-looking girl who happens to be in your employ?"

"Sure, but she had traits I either envied or disliked...I had to conquer her efforts somehow..."

"You mean put her down...?"

"Put it how you may, Ms. Orileda...it felt good to me to sleep with her when I felt like it... so I did..."

Lila exhaled, knowing it was a waste disliking him. They would probably go their separate ways after the case is over. Unlike Fischer, he wasn't a close friend of Allen's. "Professor Toner, you said something about envying or disliking her. Do you want to elaborate on that?"

"She sometimes carries my bags for my competitions and hunting...but when it comes down to shootings, I can almost swear it...she's a better shot than me..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Against a dribble is a sure sign of a win or a loss outside the court.

Lila couldn't read Mrs. Cook's emotional state when she came into her waiting room before she invited her into her office for privacy.

Mrs. Cook avoided Lila's eyes briefly before holding them slowly.

Lila allowed it. It indicated some level of mourning and acceptance.

"You were right, Ms. Orileda...I don't need to have the photograph. He agreed to a split...all in half...me with the house... He wants to marry the maid..." Mrs. Cook said. "He wants to leave me and marry the maid...the Nanny...He said something about moving away with her..."

It was an unbearable, much prolonged self-pity party, but Lila allowed it. "I'm sorry," she said.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

There is an untamed human error in the ego intimately calling chaos.

Llyin and Tiffany came in together. They were soon separated into two different interrogation rooms. Allen decided it was wise for him to be in the observation room. Wilson easily agreed.

Lila was ready for the procedural interview of only one of the two, and only Allen knew that. And as she walked towards one room, Wilson pulled her towards the other. He had every instinct correctly based on what he knew.

“There is a high probability—”

“The guy did it?” she finished.

“Yes,” Wilson replied, as a matter of factly.

“You’ve got to trust me on this one, Wilson,” Lila said.

Wilson hesitated briefly, then resolved to follow her into the room occupied by Tiffany Carnes.

“Good morning, Ms. Carnes,” Lila announced excitedly as she entered the room.

Tiffany forced a smile as Lila took her seat. “Hi, Ms. Orileda. I didn’t know you worked for the police.”

“I don’t. They use me for jobs no one else wants to do.”

Tiffany smiled.

Lila was determined not to unease Lila in any way. For all the two assistants knew, they were there because of their possible testimonies in Toner's case.

"Mrs. Carnes, did you know Professor Toner had surveillance systems in his office?" Lila asked.

There was a sudden spark of shock. "In his waiting room?"

Lila shook her head. "In his office."

"Why would he do that?" Tiffany asked with a frown.

"Why wouldn't he do that? It's his office," Lila replied.

"He engages in sex in that office with his students," Tiffany commented.

"With you?"

Tiffany tensed up, visibly, and gained silence.

Lila continued. "Ms. Carnes, you don't have to worry about being on one of his tapes. You weren't. Besides, the digital mode has a ninety-day limit. If he was indulging in such against the women's knowledge, I'm certain the police will look into that..."

"They should," Tiffany commented.

"Besides," Lila continued. "You weren't found on the tape removing the STS guns...someone else was..." Lila removed a photograph from the file on the table and passed it to Tiffany. The man in it was bearded, wearing a baseball cap and dark clothing.

"Tiffany drew her head back, tightening the muscles around her eyes briefly before releasing the file. "I don't know this man."

Lila held her eyes steadily. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure...I thought we were here for the case against Professor Toner...You found a new suspect?"

"This is preliminary," Wilson said. "We'd like to make sure everything aligns."

Lila continued the line of questioning. "Ms. Carnes, are you aware that the neighbor in front of your home, as well as the one beside your home, both have surveillance cameras?"

"Ms. Orileda, it wouldn't be my business but that of my neighbor what they equip their homes with."

"Sometimes, it is good to know such things..." Lila allowed the moody silence to permeate the room for a few moments. She noisily opened the file, removed another photograph, and dropped it in front of Tiffany. "This is a printout of the same man coming out of your home, Ms. Carnes...are you sure you do not know this man?"

Tiffany adjusted her sitting position. "I need to call my lawyer now."

Lila stopped all communications.

\*\*\*\*\*

The dreaded limits of greed have no limits.

The dreaded limits of greed have no limits.

When Lila exited the room, she kindly asked Gerald Lyons to see her outside the interrogation room.

Allen, who left the observation room to join her, was with her when he came to her some five minutes later after a brief conversation with his client.

"You cannot represent this case," she said.

He frowned. "Why?"

"Correct me if I am wrong, but her tone on the phone indicated she may be talking to someone from *Preston and Associates*..."

Lyons nodded. "Yes."

She shook her head. "I am certain there is a conflict of interest here. The first Lawyer for Pierce came from your firm. The second lawyer, Mr. Preston himself, came from your firm. And being that Professor Toner is my client and is still behind bars for the same crime and also Mr. Preston's client, I think you should mull this over with him..."

Squinting his eyes, he assessed her appearance. "Who do you think you are? You think you can tell me what client I can or cannot take...?"

Allen turned his back and retrieved his phone. "I'm calling Preston."

"So will I?" Lyons said.

\*\*\*\*\*

There is goodwill extendable in the snow. And one adoptable in a firestorm.

Lila faced Tiffany again in the interrogation room. She pushed a piece of paper with the name of a law firm and a number written on it towards her. "*Commick and Shore* are the next best thing. Hiring Mr. Preston is not the best decision. He represents Professor Toner."

Tiffany exhaled.

Lila continued. "I know you have the right to remain silent, but there is something important I have to tell you, strictly from one woman to another. If the intellectual in you wants to know what really went horribly wrong with STS, tell your lawyer you want to speak to me alone. I suggest you hear me on this. You still have the right to remain silent. But you should hear it."

\*\*\*\*\*

Probability surprises no one but the believers.

Morton was waiting for her in the observation room. She reckoned word had gotten to him on the state of his case against Toner.

Everyone stared at her as she came in. She had intentionally held them in suspense about the nature of Tiffany Carnes's guilt or innocence. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Morton voiced the thought. "What the heck is going on with this new suspect?"

Lila came to a stop in front of Morton. "Ms. Carnes is not a suspect, Detective. She is as guilty as heaven, hell, and high water freezing over and frying. And no doubt together."

Morton smiled. "That's a lot, I'll say."

She moved over to the large table in the middle of the room, surrounded by observation screens. And opened her file. She removed one photo from the file. "We have little to nothing on the killing of five. But this is surveillance on her home, the same day as the killing of three, this so-called man is on the move..." She removed another photo from the file "...Some time later, the same bearded man was in Toner's office..." She removed a set of photographs from the file and spread them on the table. "On the day the one was targeted and killed, there is more evidence because it is recent...every stage was captured, but this is the winning scene because for the first time, every screen observable captured this man..."

"There is only one problem..." Morton said. "...what do we charge her with and—"

“Detective Morton...” Lila interrupted and held his eyes fully. “There aren’t any more associates to search for and profile. The man you are looking at in that picture is Tiffany Carnes disguised as a man. She is the serial killer.”

“Holy freaking shit!” Morton exclaimed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A dedicated spirit practices beating the ailments of opportunities.

Lila was informed in the observation room that Rebecca had asked for a moment with her. Morton refused to let her in the room alone with Rebecca. An argument ensued, which led both of them into Chief Deyvon's office.

Allen followed them in.

Lila related the story. "I promised Tiffany Carnes she could ask for me and I will come to her alone. Those were my words...on behalf of the investigation I basically spearheaded, chief...I must fulfil those..."

Morton shook his head. "Don't feed me that crack of bull, Ms. Orileda. You can feed Allen such things. He's a puppy in your hands."

Lila opened her mouth involuntarily. "What?" She realized no one knew the true nature of her relationship with Allen. They mostly assumed his refusal to get paid meant he had some sort of hopeless devotion, some highly feverish dreams for her, rather than the intricate intellectual nature of their job.

Allen squinted, wondering what the implications of Morton's tease really meant. "Which reminds me...you're getting a puppy for Christmas."



She shook her head, wondering what game Allen was playing. "I don't need a puppy. With a definitive end to this case, I can relax a little...but I need to go in there alone—"

Allen studied her. "You've been wrapped up on this case for days, getting ready for this interview today. And you have not...admittedly had romantic relations in years...you're either working or introverted in your security domain...all these things say you need a puppy..."

"There, you see, Chief, Allen is playing puppy again..." Morton said. "He can't even tell the woman the real truth... She's wound up too tight, uptight and rigid...she needs more than just a puppy, and we all know it..."

Lila exhaled, wanting whatever ego-tripping session she was in with Morton to be over so she could go back to the interrogation room to talk to Tiffany.

Everyone in the room held some sort of smile.

Lila turned to Deyvon. "Chief..."

Deyvon hesitated briefly. "I'm afraid I don't have a recommendation on that issue...only for what you came into my office for...Morton, let her go in alone, will you?"

Morton shrugged. "She can go in alone if she promises to be a consultant on some of the cases I may need her in..."

Lila concealed her excitement by deepening her tone. "A consultant? I'd better be paid the same rate as the men...Otherwise, I won't."

Deyvon smiled. "Of course you'll be paid the same rate as every first-year consultant...adjusted accordingly with time...Morton?"

Morton smiled, hesitating briefly. "If she lasts long enough... No doubt, she'll be paid the same rate...otherwise she'll find out somehow, and it'll be a case of both sexism and racism...there's always Mrs. Heimlich..."

Deyvon nodded. "Uhn...uhn...the inevitable Mrs. Heimlich...That's settled then..."

As they made their way out, Morton leaned towards her and whispered, "If that egomaniacal plain-looking cookie-dough bitch beats this rap somehow, if not me, I swear someone will put a bullet in her head in Offline..."

Lila held his eyes. "I'm sure we both know the town well enough ...but Morton ... is telling me these things a test of loyalty? Already?"

Morton shrugged. "Call it whatever you may, Lila. I did not say anything."

Lila studied him. "You overwork yourself. No doubt you need my help. If you let her lose, if somehow you can't prove she's the murderer in the fake mask, one of the five in STS will put a bullet in her head for you...And this time, it's the real catch if you can..."

\*\*\*\*\*

It is easier to appoint a misgiving than correct a misfortune.

Lila held Tiffany's eyes fully before she spoke. "There is a grace for the ethical and the moral, sure, but such graces or lack thereof are not criminal. About Toner...I know you may feel he owes you something...I want you to know he doesn't...You saw him for what he was...it is unfortunate. But that's besides the point..."

Tiffany exhaled.

"There is a grave stupidity in hoarding points you cannot connect...what you dug yourself in was graver than you understood...So, do correct me whenever you feel I am wrong on the issue...Otherwise, I still believe this needs to be said. To gain a sense of supremacy, the guys couldn't precede or return, subvert or suppress, make or break a single black point. They couldn't write it. Instead, they used two points they couldn't afford or connect to create a probability lens. You then, being incredibly upset that you were a better shot than all of them put together, always excluded from things that count, and dealing with such unpleasant sexist things, you became bitter and resentful, and there was no way to find solace....falling in love with the wrong person probably compounded your pain...but getting dumped by him as if your intelligence meant nothing could have taken you towards the edge. Despite this, you forgot to take a moment and assess whether Toner was worth it...Life

and nature have inevitable checks and balances. It takes the depth of thought to know it... You cannot go by a background without being able to measure against it. There will be consequences to be accounted for. That is also the measure of who you are..."

Tiffany shifted in her seat. "I get the physics aspect of it... It takes depth, but I am still trying to get what you're trying to say with a point..."

"I am saying you took a point that a group of fools had no true reality for in any direction, but made probabilistic in a worth-no-reality STS...might as well be STD diseases they're spreading and breeding...and you reduced it to a point, a black point having no reality for you... and started killing people in the red point zones... in oddities... Doing this is genetically, intuitively, and intellectually wrong... Learn this well: intelligence is a responsibility, not merely an identity. Because of this, you became an unnatural spatial catastrophe, a degenerate intruder—a phantom menace... as there are ever so many phantom menaces floating around headless in science...you started from a wrong..."

Tiffany exhaled.

And Lila wondered whether she had an idea about the wrong. She repeated the statement. "You started from a wrong."

Tiffany's ensuing silence was read by Lila as consent.

Lila continued. "Whether you are blonde, brunette, auburn, or whatever doesn't matter... Your hair means

absolutely nothing because your skin and genetic pool defines you racially... even from a point of predation, you don't eat your hair...no one does...even cannibals who eat skin can make no sense out of eating hair...forget all the delusions stupid people spread as good or bad... the first thing you needed to be is real and human fools were disembodied and bad...you were worse...and unfortunately those fools may have a chance to correct their wrong... something tells me they will drop STS like a heavy sack of potatoes... while you will be busy fighting against the death penalty... that's awfully unfair for the true owner of a point so fair... and from that fair point you have the wrong mirror...clearly there is nothing but disaster in that unnatural pattern..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Chaos has the dangerous habit of courting chaos beyond its means.

Rebecca Cook rushed into Lila's office, seeming dazed and confused. "I swear I didn't do it."

Shocked, Lila shouted, "Mrs. Cook!"

"I swear, Ms. Orileda, I didn't do it," Rebecca replied.

Lila and Allen frowned. "Do what?"

"You have not heard?" Cook asked and began to pace.

Lila deepened her frown. "Do what?"

"Mrs. Cook?" Allen called.

Rebecca stopped pacing and exhaled. "Edena Lopez has been shot."

Lila's jaw dropped. "Mrs. Cook!"

Rebecca shook her head vehemently. "I swear, I didn't do it."

Allen left the room on the phone.

Lila sat in place, eyeing Mrs. Cook with great suspicion.

"How did you know?"

"It happened at Hunter Park. There were witnesses. Someone wearing a black mask shot her in the head while she was there with the children. They say there was blood and brain splatter on the children..."

"Horror!" Lila said. "Allen?" she called as Allen made his way back into the office.

Allen nodded. "She's dead."

Lila turned to Rebecca. "Should I guess why you're here, Mrs. Cook?"

"I know I didn't kill her," Rebecca said, stretching her arms sideways. "And I may be the number one suspect. We need to figure out who killed her."

Lila widened her eyes. "We? I don't have a husband for her to sleep around with."

Rebecca exhaled and stopped pacing again. "I thought about it only briefly. But it was about killing both of them. But I didn't do it. I'm young enough to go out

there and get another man. Plus, I am getting half. I can go get another man and move on with my life.”

Lila wondered how it could be that murder cases were not seemingly falling at her feet when once they were a rarity. Was she to voluntarily involve herself in another possible murder case, she was already involved in? She was suspicious of the woman who pretended to be poor, so she wouldn't pay her fees. “It is costly, Mrs. Cook, to retain me for any reason.”

“Unless he too is dead or did it, I'm getting all or half.”

Lila closed her eyes and shook her head. “Just how close did you get, Mrs. Cook? Did you try murder for hire?”

Rebecca shook her head and took her seat. “No. I stayed with my self-pity and sadness instead. I'm glad I did. Sure I disliked the woman. She was a gold-digging home-breaking prostituting heifer...but I didn't kill the whore...I swear I didn't. If I did, I wouldn't be here. I need you to find out who did.”

Lila exhaled and stared towards Allen.

Allen took his seat.

Lila waited for some sort of response from Allen.

“It could be the KKK,” Allen said.

Lila opened her mouth involuntarily. “What?”

“He's one of them,” Rebecca said.

Lila frowned. “You knew?”

"I wasn't born yesterday. I knew," Rebecca blurted.

Lila was dumbfounded. "But whatever does the KKK have to do with this?"

"Mr. Cook is trying to divorce a white woman to marry and run away with a Hispanic woman," Allen said.

Lila twisted her mouth. "Surely, the KKK couldn't be that shallow-minded, wicked, and stupid."

"They can be," Allen said.

"But how did they know?" Lila asked thoughtfully before turning to Rebecca. "Mrs. Cook!"

Rebecca shook her head, folding her arms to herself. "My life was falling apart. I am not allowed to tell?"

Lila drew back and studied Rebecca. Failing to fully understand the situation, turned to Allen again. "Why would the KKK be involved in such a thing?"

Allen held her eyes with resolve. "They were going to lose a brother to a wetback. Besides, he was leaving an Anglo-Saxon woman for that very wetback."

"They sure can," Rebecca nodded in agreement.

Lila had a sudden wave of an unwanted headache. If Rebecca didn't commit the murder and the KKK didn't, what were the odds someone else did? "Damn, Allen. We close one pile of shit, and another opens right up."

Allen looked puzzled as he always did when he expected clarification from her. "What are the odds of that insinuation, Lila?"



Comfortable and comforted, Rebecca leaned into the chemistry and conversation between the two by leaning inward towards them.

Lila stared from Rebecca to Allen, and leaned slightly forward as well. "Well...it's all about who told Jack, Dick, and Harry..."

Allen raised an eyebrow, smiling.

Grateful to be with the twosome and accepted as a client, Rebecca hadn't yet found anything funny.

"Let's try and find out who, shall we, Allen?"

Allen nodded. "Sure."

She held their eyes with a storyteller's liveliness as they both held her undivided attention. "Jack, Dick, and Harry were told by someone...then Jack, Dick, and Harry told Jack, Dick, and Harry...But Dick was pissed—"

"Which Dick was pissed?" Allen asked.

Lila briefly stared at the intellectual as if he had the intelligence of a toad. "All the Dicks and very much the same Dick were pissed. It's a pattern, Allen. Catch up with me..."

"I'm catching it," Rebecca said. "I told everyone I knew..."

"That about sounds the same as what I said, Mrs. Cook..."

“What about the victim...what’s her role in this pattern?” Allen asked.

“The victim told on herself by being in the pattern and committing the dead, sin, crime or whatever...thinking no one will know...any full-blooded imbecile should be able to see that coming even while drunk...it really doesn’t matter who slept with whose husband and why in the pattern...but it matters, without any level of bias, rational or irrational and uncertainty who told Jack, Dick and Harry...”

“I told Jack, Dick, and Harry,” Rebecca confessed.

\*\*\*\*\*

There is a sense of loyalty in existence that must exceed itself to persist.

Allen drove by a large estate in the most affluent area in Offline, past an array of affluent streets upon affluent street, before parking the new unlabelled company car in front of a large Mansion. The largeness of the estate must require a lot of help, Lila thought. She couldn’t wish for anything like it. And she was certain Allen, who could afford it, wouldn’t want anything like it either.

Mrs. Castle had all the information she needed on the case. She nevertheless insisted that Lila come see her privately, alone.

Lila obliged. “I’m sure it won’t take long,” she told Allen as she exited the car.

She was seated in the large library when she arrived.

Lila sat on the comfy chair across from hers. "How are you today, Mrs. Castle?"

Mrs. Castle smiled. "Dandy Ms. Orileda, just dandy...I wanted to talk to you about this, Ms...Ms..."

"Ms. Carnes. Tiffany Carnes..."

"Yes, her...I hear it in my extended family that such things don't go unpunished..."

Lila was silenced, not thoroughly shocked.

"I just want to ask you for a simple favor..." Mrs. Castle continued.

Lila nodded. "Sure."

"Good...if this turns out to be true..."

Lila frowned. "You mean if it turns out to be true that someone in your extended family believes that such things don't go unpunished?"

"Yes, indeed, that Ms. Orileda...if it turns out to be true...I need you not to get involved in it."

Lila strained the muscles of her face. "You mean that I should not get involved in any investigation of such kinds..."

Mrs. Castle nodded. "Yes. That's exactly it."

Lila exhaled heavily. "Mrs. Castle, I'll tell you that you can live the rest of your life assured that the person who killed your son for no reason at all will be behind bars for the rest of her life. You can rest in peace with that."

Mrs. Castle remained silent briefly before speaking in a low, resolved tone. "Ms. Orileda, I need your words here as I am certain you are capable of uttering them but also of abiding by them...I need your word so you can go by the rest of your day, and I can get to tell you how grateful I am to have been acquainted with you and give you my word as well that I will be referring anyone in need of your help to you."

Lila forced a smile. "Mrs. Castle, you have my word. Loyalty means a lot in my business."

"I know...Thank you so much for coming to see me, Ms. Orileda. I'm sure I will see you soon."

Lila stood to leave. "I'm certain of it. Thank you."

\*\*\*\*\*

The potent electromagnetic buoyancy of the earthian sphere exceeds all illusions of progression.

Allen was seated in the new car outside with a broad smile when she emerged. He had picked it. She had bought it. Their business was flourishing. He refused to get paid.

And she felt that pang of joy beyond happiness to have him as a partner. As with most emotions since the trauma, she kept it to herself. Every pain had been amplified since—every sensation of joy or ecstasy, beyond words.

He leaned into her as she approached, ever so cautious; there could be surveillance, so close any

outsider could have thought they were lovers. He often reminded her that surveillance could read lips. The only thing it couldn't read was the mind.

She leaned in towards him as well, immersing herself in the moment.

"What say vengeful rich old woman?"

She narrowed her eyes. "How did you know she is vengeful?"

He smiled. "You often forget I am somewhat one of them..."

"I'm glad you never give me cause to remember."

"She's the type...they think they can get away with anything. And she demanded you tell her the truth in person for thorough confirmation..."

She shrugged. "Whatever it is, I'm not getting in the middle of it. She wants me to know that so-called extended family members are bitter and vengeful, and something may happen to Carnes..."

Allen raised his eyebrows. "Shouldn't we inform Morton?"

Lila shook her head. "Absolutely not...Carnes killed nine people...she deserves whatever is coming to her. The worst of it. Besides, I gave Castle my word, I will have nothing to do with any such investigation. We must not touch it if it happens."

Allen was surprised by her sense of loyalty. "World. Loyalty is an odd virtue here in Offline," he said, opening the car door for her.

"Sure," she said as she moved towards her seat. "What happens in Offline is often stranger than fiction. I intend to find the secrets of all of those."

## **AUTHOR'S ENDNOTES**

I wrote this book in homelessness. Every single word. If it resonates with you academically, spiritually, emotionally, or in any other way, it is free. If it doesn't, you have a different preference and will never return to my work. Additionally, it is free. Graces. I have never wanted to run or rule the globe. Not my thing. I do aim to connect with humankind and bridge generational gaps via practical, emotional, and spiritual intelligence—matters that connect humanity and save lives like mine against the challenges of life, which I am personally familiar with. My works are typically accounts of life, nature, science, politics, and other experiential realities. Despite everything I've been through, I consider myself fortunate to be alive.

The work as well as others like it can be found on my website available free at [www.edewlogics.com](http://www.edewlogics.com). To support free works like this and others available on my site, [please support the free books for life cause](#). Thank you. You may choose to donate whatever you may through [lomopeju@protonmail.com](mailto:lomopeju@protonmail.com) paypal handle. And you may put your support into the love and enjoyment of music at [rillmusic on Bandcamp](#). Thank you.



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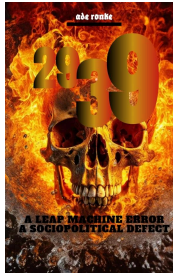
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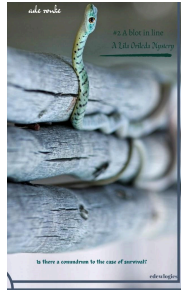
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## Next year



*The unexpected preemptive leap differential machine error, the Knapse, triggers the co-embedded synaptic alarm in its designer Patrick Tinsel towards the chaos associated with it. He must correct the sociopolitical cost or enable its realizations.*

## Next in series



*Mrs. Butterfingers is Atlett's best source of gossip. As the head of the Senior Girls Association, she is almost certain of everything. She's also Lila's favorite person for conspiracy theories and gossip. She is almost certain that the KKK murdered the Nanny in the park to proclaim their superiority. Almost certain that the Union bank tech staff emptied the secured vaults of the Overlook Bank of Atlett. She is also almost certain, Trustscape, the new shadow Detective Agency, is to blame for setting fire to Lila's new corporate car in order to scare her. And life at Atlett is as Lila imagined it, as her cases pile up against all odds.*

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