

# The Fruit Of Idun

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El Monito Enterprises

# DEDICATION

It's the same person for both of  
us, and she knows it.

## WHAT WAS

Sarah Patrick stands in front of the empty school. She wears a denim jacket and a knit cap with tails against the autumn chill. She looks up the street and down to the backpack at her feet. A breeze rushes by, and she pulls the jacket tight around her and crosses her arms.

Rocking from foot to foot, she looks up the street again and freezes when a black minivan turns the corner. She hunches down into her jacket and again looks down at the backpack as the van creeps along. It stops in front of her with a soft whine of its brakes, and she takes a half step back, but she is not yet ready to run.

Her face is framed by the passenger window. The empty schoolyard is behind her to the left. The front doors of the school are behind her to the right. She stares into the van with wide eyes, her lips parted.

Thomas Patrick drives along in his new car, smiling and drumming his hands on the wheel in time with the Boy George song on the radio. He comes to a stop in front of the school and looks out at the empty schoolyard with a look of disgust, sighing and rolling his eyes.

He sits in the exact spot the minivan occupied. Leaving the engine running, he gets out and heads around the front of the car, looking around, expectant.

There is no Sarah through the passenger window as before. Only the schoolyard and the front doors. Thomas comes around and walks to the front of the school. He tries the doors. They are locked. He spins and whips his head back and forth, looking. Searching.

He jogs a few feet to his left, then stops and jogs a few feet in the opposite direction. Confused and frightened, he looks at his watch and throws up his hands. He whispers her name, then shouts it, over and over.

He looks at his watch again. Looks around again. He puts his hands on his hips and heads back to the car. He jerks open the door and slides in. He speeds away, the leaves rolling along in the gutter behind him.

Everything is cold and gray. Another breeze, and the leaves tumble across the street.

## TWO YEARS LATER

Thomas stood in front of a medicine cabinet mirror in his mother's tiny, shabby bathroom. His crumpled shirt on the toilet lid while as he shaved with a battered electric razor. His ribs and hips were prominent through his pale skin. His jeans sagged.

The buzzing of the razor was not loud enough to keep the sounds of the TV from penetrating the door, or his mother's voice from penetrating his brain. "She said she was gonna make chocolate chip cookies," Bernadette said.

Thomas stopped the razor and ran the cutting head under the water. He stared into his reflection and shook his head. The hollows under his eyes were nearly black. "But she always makes them too *flat*," Bernadette said.

Thomas leaned forward, touched his forehead to the mirror, and closed his eyes with a sigh.

Bernadette sat on a stained couch in front of the TV. A large crystal ashtray sat on the coffee table in front of her. She held an unlit cigarette in her right hand and a fancy gold lighter in her left. Barefoot, she wore a wrinkled, oversized nightshirt. “And I don’t like ‘em like that,” she shouted.

Thomas opened the bathroom door and stepped into view, pulling his shirt down over his head. She flinched like she was startled by his entrance. Her head snapped around and she glared at him. “I don’t *like* them,” she said.

“Then don’t fucking eat ‘em, OK?” He got his shirt situated and dropped his arms, defeated.

She pursed her lips and lit the cigarette, squinting at him through the smoke. “I will too fucking eat ‘em,” she said. “Just so I can tell her they suck.” She nodded her head, satisfied, and turned back to the TV.

Thomas dug in his pocket for his keys and headed to the front door. He scooped up his jacket, and she looked up as he passed. “Do you still love me, Tommy?” she asked.

He stopped short of the front door, but didn’t look back. “Of course I do, Ma . . . I’m just tired.”

He walked out. She watched his retreating back through the closing door. She looked back to the TV, waving the smoke from her face and nodding. “Tired,” she whispered.

Thomas jogged down the steps of the small front porch. He shrugged into his jacket and headed down the driveway. His mother's tiny house sat by itself at the end of a dead-end street. Empty lots on either side, brown and overgrown. More tiny houses, more of the same, farther up the street. The highway bypass loomed over the house, just a hundred yards away. The houses were quiet, but the dull roar of the traffic floated through the neighborhood.

He walked down the short driveway, running his hands through his hair. His car was filthy, looking like he hadn't washed it in years.

He reached the mailbox and dug out the mail. He sifted through it with half an eye. Reaching the bottom of the pile, he staggered back into the street. He gasped and clenched the mail in his fists.

Sticking out of his left hand was a creased postcard mailer. *Have You Seen Me?* The picture was the smiling face of Sarah Patrick.

His knees buckled and he dropped to squat on his heels. He reached out to the mailbox post to keep from falling over. His face twisted, and his shoulders heaved as he cried into the crumpled picture of his sister.

He had to keep Bernadette from seeing it. Keep it to himself. The sound of his grief in the shadow of the highway couldn't compete with the noise of the cars.

Sarah sat in front of a vanity mirror in a colorful room. Her heavy makeup and vacant stare gave her a look of false adulthood. Like a child beauty contestant. Her hair was in two tight schoolgirl pigtails.

Stifled sobbing from behind her pulled her from her daydream. She blinked and turned to face her crying roommate. Beverly sat on one of the two twin beds, her knees drawn to her chest. Made up and dressed like Sarah, she could have been her twin. She clutched a fist full of pink sheet to her face and sniffled into it.

Sarah raised an eyebrow and turned back to the mirror, unmoved. At a polite knock on the door, she glanced aside. She forced a smile onto her face and looked back up. It looked like a desperate leer. She twisted it and bent it and forced it into a natural expression and rose from the vanity. By the time she opened the door, she was beaming.

Liza stood in the hallway. Thin and pale severity, she stood with a smile just like Sarah's. She wore a man's business suit with a scarlet flower in the breast pocket. She turned and raised an expectant arm. "It's time, Sarah," she said. Her voice was full and musical. "He's waiting in the Red Room."

Sarah walked under Liza's arm and fell in beside her. Liza hugged her to her side like family. She glanced at Beverly through the closing door. Her smile slipped and her hug tightened. She took a breath and forced the joy back into her face.

She steered Sarah down the hall, and with matching smiles, they walked to a waiting elevator.

Inside the elevator, Liza inserted a key and the doors closed. She stepped back as the elevator descended and stood next to Sarah. She groped beside her and pulled Sarah's hand into hers. The elevator stopped, but Liza made no move to open the door.

She pulled Sarah in front of her so they were both facing their reflections in the polished metal of the elevator doors. She caressed Sarah's shoulders and arms, and her hands fall to Sarah's breasts. Neither smile faltered.

Liza bent down and put her mouth to Sarah's ear. "One day soon," she whispered. "You'll be too old to please them. But not for *me*." She squeezed, and Sarah gasped, her smile twisting with pain.

She spun Sarah around and slammed her back. She pressed herself into her with breathless passion, dropping her head like a striking predator, kissing Sarah's neck. She pulled away, stepped back, and slapped Sarah across the face. The blow drove Sarah's head into the metal behind her.

Sarah made no sound. No move to defend herself. She looked up with clear eyes, but her smile was gone. Liza arranged and straightened herself and stood like nothing had happened. "Tonight," she said, her face open and calm, "you'll be mine."

She pulled a handkerchief from her inside pocket and brushed it across Sarah's face and throat. Like a mother cleaning a small child, she dabbed the handkerchief with her tongue and continued to wipe, putting everything back in order.

"And I want him still on you," she said, "still *in* you when you

come to me.” She replaced the handkerchief and turned Sarah back around. Staring into Sarah’s reflected eyes, she sighed with pleasure.

“Now show me that smile,” she said, reaching for the key. Sarah forced the radiant smile back up as the doors opened, and Liza ushered her into the hall.

A fat man sat naked on the huge bed, his sweating and sloppy appearance at odds with the luxury of the room. Sarah stood a few feet from the foot of the bed, small and beautiful with her beaming smile.

She slid her white blouse over her head, exposing a soft cotton bra. She dropped the shirt behind her and swayed out of her skirt. Her white panties were decorated with smiling cartoon kittens.

She reached behind her to loosen her bra, and the fat man rose with a grunt. She looked up into his face, and her smile became a grin.

Colin Schmidt sat behind his desk in a small, tidy office. Although a very neat and clean man, his desk was strewn with files and papers. One wall of his office was a window that looked out on busy men

and women, and desks as messy as his own.

Keith Manger sat across from him, loud and animated. “So this fuckin’ guy gets picked up by Everson and Hobbes, trying to buy a bootleg DVD of some shitty cop show,” he said. Schmidt seemed to barely listen. Manger seemed to barely mind.

“So they pull him into the room and start going over him about Alexandre,” he continued with a shake of his head. “The guy’s a rock. Then, the feds show up and take over.” Schmidt looked up with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s right,” Manger said, smiling. “They pulled the rug out from under us locals, but the guy’s still a rock . . . until they pull out the book.”

Schmidt furrowed his brow and shook his head, his shoulder going up in a question. “What book?” he said.

“*This* book,” Manger said. He pulled a thick manila envelope from the bag at his side and tossed it on the desk. “The diary of Viktor Soklov. They already went through it,” he finished with a wink and a smile.

Schmidt opened the envelope and peered inside. He pulled a battered leather book out and opened it up like he was waiting for the punchline. He read a few lines and looked back up. “So, why do we have it now?” he said.

“Look, they’re gonna drop him off in a squad car. Right in front of his door,” Manger said, his face moving from delight to mock concern. “The Russians are gonna get word that he was grilled by us

*and* the feds, and they're gonna wonder what he said. Without Viktor, we got no play, so we gotta sit on the book until the feds are done. *Then*, we can look into it. For now, though, we were told to sit on it," he finished. He stared at Schmidt, waiting for a reaction. Schmidt just stared back. "So there you go," Manger said.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Manger looked disappointed. He took a deep breath and gave Schmidt a pointed look. "There are names in the back of that book," he said, and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Names of missing girls."

Schmidt blinked his confusion away. He looked back down and opened the book and leafed through the pages to the back. "Jesus Christ," he said. He looked up at Manger with a stricken expression as realization spread across his face. He snapped the book closed. "Why do *we* have it, then?"

"Ah, none of the names are newer than eighteen months. All we can do is file the names, the dates, the times, and wait. You're on your way out, and they know you won't make waves." Schmidt looked away with an embarrassed sigh. Manger shrugged and spread his hands. "They got no tape yet," he continued. "They'll be sitting across the street to see who comes, and we got no choice."

He reached down and gathered up his bag and stood up, buttoning his jacket with his free hand. "Who's gonna care about some missing Jersey trash, anyway?" he said. They shared a moment of silence, both men avoiding the eyes of the other. Manger broke

the silence with a dramatic sigh.

“You gonna fight it?” he asked.

“You know I can’t,” Schmidt said. “How long do we have?”

“Two days. They’re gonna send Jonesy up so you don’t have to make your own copies and file your own files, and you get budget for follow-up.”

“As long as . . .”

“As long as we wait ‘til the feds are done,” Manger said. He looked down at Schmidt and shook his head. “The names are old, man.”

“I know, I just . . .” Schmidt shrugged and shook his head. He reached up and rubbed his temples.

“Me too,” Manger said. “Dinner tonight? Tony’s?”

Schmidt waved with an absent nod, and pulled the book closer. Manger watched for a moment and walked out with an absent nod of his own.

As he walked away, he almost bumped into Thomas threading his way through the desks. They exchanged a greeting, Manger expansive, Thomas subdued. They moved apart with a wave.

Thomas entered with a soft knock on the door frame. Schmidt looked up from the book and smiled. “Tommy,” he shouted.

“How’s it going, Schmidt? It’s been awhile.”

Schmidt rose and came around the desk to embrace Thomas with back-slapping warmth. He pulled away and regarded Thomas’s face. Seeing Thomas fighting back emotion, he became polite concern.

He pushed Thomas into the chair and shut the door. He eased onto the edge of the desk in front of Thomas and crossed his arms. Thomas covered his face with his hands.

“What’s going on, Tommy?”

Thomas heaved a sigh and scrubbed his forehead. He dropped his hands to his lap and looked at Schmidt’s feet. “It’s been bad,” he said. “I’m sorry . . . I don’t want to put anything else on you, but you were good to me and Ma when . . . you were good to us.”

Schmidt looked on, a patient listener. Thomas reached into his back pocket and pulled out the folded postcard. He reached up and handed it to Schmidt without a word. Schmidt looked down at the card and back to Thomas. He stood and headed around his desk, but he stopped when he unfolded the card.

“Ah, Jesus,” he said. “I’m sorry, Tommy.” He dropped his arms and finished his walk around the desk. He fell into his chair with his hands in his lap. “I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Is there anything we can do?”

“We already did what we could. It’s been two years. You should be talking to the FBI.”

“I’m talking to *you*,” Thomas said.

Schmidt looked at his desk and paused with a frown. He leaned forward and traded the card for Viktor’s diary. “I don’t believe in coincidence,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

Schmidt looked up at Thomas, but his eyes were far away. “I

don't believe in coincidence," he said again. He flipped to the back of the book and scanned the names. Thomas leaned forward. Schmidt's eyes widened, and he flipped the pages quicker, becoming frantic. He stopped on a page and froze. "Jesus," he whispered.

"What?"

"Jesus Christ."

"*What?*"

Schmidt looked up, still not seeing. "They're dated. That *motherfucker*." He jumped up and looked around, his expression lost and full of panic.

Thomas stared and started to rise. Schmidt dropped back into his chair, uncertainty replacing the panic. He reached for the phone, but snatched his hand back. He was lost. He looked at Thomas. "I can't talk to him," he said.

"Who?"

"They aren't going to let me talk to him and he might know something."

"Know what?" Thomas said. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Schmidt blinked as if coming out of a trance. He calmed and gathered himself with a breath. "The FBI pulled in Viktor Soklov, trying to stir things up with his uncle."

"I saw Viktor at Benny's the other night," Thomas said, his eyebrows lowering in puzzlement. "It was Karaoke night and he was buying beer for everybody like an asshole. He's nobody, right?"

“They don’t give a *shit* about him,” Schmidt said with a dismissive wave. “They want Alexandre, but they found a book on Viktor.” He pulled the book into his chest. “*This* book,” he continued. “A book with names in it . . . missing names . . . Sarah’s name.”

Thomas grew still and tense. His throat worked as he tried to hold back emotion. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“They’re using him to try to get deeper, and I can’t touch him until they’re done with him.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“There’s *nothing*,” Schmidt said. He looked sick to his stomach. “Just wait, and give me some time.”

Thomas set his jaw and stood, using the edge of the desk for support. “No,” he said, his chest heaving. “I’m not waiting.”

“Tommy, that’s the wrong thing to do. There’s nothing they’ll even *let* us do,” he said, giving Thomas a pleading look. “She’s probably -”

“No,” Thomas shouted. “She’s *not*.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked up at the ceiling. “Nobody cares anymore but me, and now I might be able to find her. What if she’s still waiting for me?” He looked at Schmidt and his gaze grew fierce. “I’m not doing it.”

He started toward the door. “Tommy,” Schmidt said. Thomas stopped and looked behind him. Schmidt offered him a pitiful shrug. “I can’t,” he said.

Thomas nodded and grabbed the door handle. “I know,” he said, “but I can.”

He hurried out, threading his way through the desks again. Schmidt half stood, then dropped back down. He turned away from Thomas’s exit and closed the diary.

A plain man sat at the window in a plain second floor motel room. He wore brown slacks and a brown tie. Peach shirt. His brown suit jacket was on the bed next to his standard issue shoulder holster.

He ate a sandwich with bored drama. Sighing and chewing and looking at the clock on the nightstand. He paused after every other bite to lean forward and put his eye to the camera’s viewfinder.

The front doors of a dirty apartment building. Cloudy glass. Black iron hardware. Gray stone. People rushing in and out of view. Everybody seemed to be in a hurry.

He sat up, tapping his foot. He sighed again and took another bite. Glanced at the clock. Rolled his eyes. He looked down at the sandwich and pulled a face, but he kept chewing. Another bite, and he leaned into the camera again.

Everybody seemed to be in a hurry, except Thomas. He came into view with uncertain strides. He looked at a scrap of paper in his hand, and up at the numbers over the doors. He reached for the door

handles and paused to look left and right, like he was checking to see if anybody was watching. He opened the doors and ducked inside.

The plain man finished taking the pictures. He sat up and traded the sandwich for a notebook and pen. He scratched ink across the paper and tossed the notebook back down. Another look through the camera and back to the sandwich. He took a big bite and sighed while he chewed.

Thomas walked in and squinted up the dim stairwell. He jogged up two flights, looking at the door numbers at every landing. He had his foot on the third flight and stopped with his eyes on a door.

He walked over and appraised it. He took a deep breath, blew it out hard, took another breath, and knocked.

The door jerked open just enough to reveal a grim-faced Viktor Soklov and his revolver. The gun came out of the shadowed interior and jammed into Thomas's cheek. Viktor swung the door wide and grabbed Thomas by the throat. A furtive look around the landing, and he snatched Thomas inside.

He slammed the door shut and threw Thomas against it. He let go of Thomas's throat and held the gun with both hands. Thomas crossed his eyes to keep the barrel in focus, squirming against the door behind him.

“What do you want?” Viktor said. His voice was deep and quiet. Thomas couldn’t get the words out. He stammered his reply.

Viktor removed a hand from the gun and slapped Thomas across the cheek. The gun barely wavered. Thomas bit his tongue and tasted blood. Bright spots of light swirled in front of his eyes. “I say again,” Viktor said. “What do you want?”

Thomas blinked the spots away and steadied, as anger washed over him. “I want to know what you did to my sister?”

Puzzlement crossed Viktor’s face, and he dropped the gun to his side. “Your sister? Did I fuck her?”

“You fucking better *not* have.”

“Hey!” Viktor slapped him again. A hard shot that bounced Thomas’s head off the door. “Shut up. You’re here and you want me and I gotta go and I don’t *know* you.” He looked Thomas up and down and dismissed him with a sneer and a shake of his head. He stuck the gun in his waistband and stepped back.

“Get the fuck outta here.”

“Two years ago,” Thomas said, rushing the words out, “my sister disappeared. Her name was in the back of your diary. The cops got it and her name’s in your book.”

Viktor drove his fist into Thomas’s stomach. Thomas folded up and dropped to the floor, retching and wheezing. Viktor leaned down and put his mouth next to Thomas’s ear and bellowed, “I DIDN’T TOUCH THOSE GIRLS.”

He opened the door and rolled Thomas onto the landing. “I

didn't touch those girls," he said.

Thomas held up his hands in warding and climbed to his feet. Viktor shut the door. Thomas dropped his hands to his gut and his face fell. He turned and shuffled down the stairs.

At the bottom, he stepped aside and leaned against the wall with his head resting back. His eyes closed. He got his breath back and pushed off to leave.

The front doors opened, and the shadows darkened as two huge, chiseled men stepped through. Dressed against the chill in identical leather coats and gloves, they could have been brothers.

The first one passed without a glance, but the second man paused and gave Thomas a penetrating look. A cold and considering look. He nodded once and followed the first man up the stairs.

The first man was Michael Volodin. He got to Viktor's door first, and stood with his hands clasped in front of him. The second man, Daniel Kagen, arrived next, and stood at Michael's shoulder.

Michael knocked twice. The sound of angry stomping through the door. Then Viktor's raised voice. "I told you -"

The door flew open, and Viktor stopped short like a dog at the end of his chain. Anger bled away to be replaced by shocked horror. He backpedaled, frantic, his eyes twitching and staring.

They followed Viktor and stopped a few steps inside. Daniel reached back and swung the door closed behind him. Michael reached into his inside pocket.

“Please,” Viktor said, his hands came up pleading. Michael’s hand emerged holding a cell phone. He favored Viktor with a look of disgust and dialed a number. He held the phone out.

“My father,” he said. “Your uncle.”

Hesitant, Viktor took the phone and placed it to his ear. He listened, eying the stone faces, and his lips twitched up in a nervous smile. “It’s ringing,” he said.

A voice came from the phone, and Viktor’s face filled with anguish. Filled with panic. The voice stopped and Viktor dropped the phone to his side. He backed away, his eyes darting from face to face.

Daniel grabbed a nearby lamp and swung it in a savage arc. Viktor shied away and raised his arm, but not enough. The lamp crashed into his face and shattered. He dropped straight to the floor.

In the sudden gloom, the men moved in, kicking and stomping in a frenzied attack. They finished and straightened up, shooting their cuffs and smoothing their hair. Michael lit a cigarette, and Daniel roamed the apartment in a careless search.

Thomas paced back and forth on the corner, watching traffic and wincing, still holding his stomach. Drying his red eyes with the back of his fist, he cursed and mumbled under his breath. He stopped and faced away from Viktor's apartment. He dropped his hands on his hips and looked down at the sidewalk.

"Fuck it," he said. A few passersby gave him a sidelong look and a wide berth, but he didn't notice. He spun and marched back to the apartments.

At the front doors, he almost collided with Michael and Daniel as they came out. Again, Michael ignored him as Thomas dodged around them, but Daniel stared at his face and watched him climb the stairs. When Thomas's feet disappeared at the first landing, Daniel turned to catch up with his friend.

Viktor's door swung open and Thomas rushed in, his mouth open and a pointing finger raised in front of him. He stopped, frozen in mid-stride, light from the landing washing over his shoulders into the apartment.

Viktor sprawled in an alarming pool of blood. His right leg and left arm, bent and crushed into wrong shapes. A hideous gash almost split the left side of his face in two, bone gleaming through the skin.

Thomas dropped his hand and closed his mouth. He looked

around at the shadows and stepped toward Viktor, avoiding the blood. His foot brushed against something on the floor, and he jumped back like he had stepped on a dead rat. It was the cell phone. He bent and snatched it up.

Viktor mumbled in Russian, a feeble noise in the quiet of the dark apartment. Thomas stared in shock and dialed 9-1-1. Viktor mumbled again, a steady stream.

He paced around Viktor and glanced at the windows, at the open front door. He jogged over and closed the door and listened to the phone in the dark.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m at Viktor Soklov’s apartment. 357 Neil Avenue, 3-C. I think he’s dying. . . I don’t know, somebody just beat the shit out of him. . . It’s pretty bad. . . Um, my name?”

He shut the phone and dropped it in his pocket. He pushed his fingers through his hair and looked around one last time. He opened the front door enough to squeeze through and eased it shut before sprinting down the stairs.

Sarah lay in a small bed in a sparse room. Fresh bruises dotted her neck and chest and arms. An ugly redness spread across the left side of her face. Liza stood over her, naked and smiling.

She rushed to Sarah and threw a long leg over the bed and

dropped down. Sarah didn't flinch. She looked up into Liza's face and returned the smile. Liza ground her pelvis on Sarah's legs and settled against her, brushing her fingers across a bruise.

"You'll be useless until you heal," Liza said. She lowered her head and licked Sarah's cheek. Bit Sarah's lower lip. Her breath sped up. "Thank God," she whispered. "We can be together all week."

She pulled Sarah's arms up to pin them above her head and kissed her. Loving and tender. Frantic and needful. Sarah responded with eager passion, and they panted against each other, ignoring everything else around them.

Bernadette lay passed out on the couch in front of the TV. A nature show about spiders. She cradled an empty bottle of gin against her chest. Her cheeks puffed out as she snored.

A shadow passed across her. A dark figure moving through the house. A second figure followed the first, moving toward Thomas's bedroom.

Thomas slept facedown in bed. An empty bottle of gin, the same brand as Bernadette's, sat on the nightstand.

A gloved hand reached in and grabbed Thomas by the hair, jerking him up. Thomas shocked awake, shouting and fighting to keep his head from being torn off. All the way up, wearing nothing

but sagging boxers, he stumbled as the hand dragged him from bed and slammed him into the wall.

The hand let go, and the figure stepped back. Daniel stood revealed, looming in front of Thomas with Michael behind him in the doorway. Michael lit a cigarette. Thomas rubbed his head in confusion. “What?” he whined.

Daniel drove his fist deep into Thomas’s side. Thomas folded over with a gagging bark and dropped to his hands and knees, curling up as he heaved.

Michael jogged the few steps into the room and unloaded a kick at Thomas’s face. Thomas’s head snapped back, and over he went, blood spouting from a gash through his right eyebrow. Daniel stood over him and watched him as he writhed and groaned.

Michael pulled a flask from his pocket and took a nip before pouring the rest over the rumpled bed. He threw the empty flask at Thomas where it bounced off his chest with a metallic ringing. He took a big drag from his cigarette and dropped it on the soaked sheets.

The bed erupted into whooshing flames. Michael turned and dropped a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. Daniel jumped as if coming out of a dream. He turned and his eyebrows shot up when he saw the fire. He almost knocked Michael over trying to get clear of the bedroom. Michael righted himself with a soft chuckle and followed him out.

Thomas pushed himself to his knees as the flames spread,

jumping to the curtains and falling to the rug on the floor. The air clogged with smoke. He stood, dizzy and shaking, and staggered from the bedroom, bouncing off the door frame as he passed.

At the couch, he stopped to survey the scene. He shook his head, flinging blood all around. He swayed and reached a hand out for balance. Almost dropping to his knees again, he grabbed Bernadette's wrist and started pulling. She dropped to the floor, waking up in confused outrage.

“Whaddaya’ doin’, fucker?” she said, her voice thick and heavy.

With his head down like a plow-horse, he plodded through the living room with his mother stretched out behind him. She struggled, still rousing from sleep, and saw the fire coming through the door. Up on the ceiling. Along the walls. Suddenly awake, she scampered up and moved toward the front door, switching places to drag Thomas.

In the street, the flames were clear through the windows and behind Thomas and Bernadette as they rushed onto the porch. The storm door banged shut behind them, and they stumbled down the steps and across the lawn to the street.

They turned and let go of each other. Thomas dropped straight to his ass, splashing water up from a puddle. He put a hand over his dripping eyebrow.

Bernadette swayed as the roof erupted, half the house now in flames. She dropped a hand to rest on Thomas's head. “My cigarettes are still in there, Tommy,” she said.

He reached up with his other hand and patted her forearm as the house burned, smoke rising into the night sky.

## WHAT IS

Thomas sat at the bar, drinking beer from a bottle in large gulps. His glare were fixed on the football game on the TV above the mirror. His eye was healed into a deep scar through the eyebrow and a slight droop in the lid.

He lit a cigarette and drained the beer, rapping a knuckle on the bar top. The bartender stepped up and dropped off a fresh bottle, dragging away the empty. Thomas made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger and fired it with a click of his tongue. He took a drag and a swig, and smoke wafted from his nose as he swallowed.

The door at the end of the bar opened, and light washed into the bar. Schmidt walked in, all neat and tidy. Almost shiny. He walked up and wiped off the stool next to Thomas with a napkin. He waved the bartender away and took the seat, leaning forward on his elbows with his hands folded together.

“I went by the shop,” Schmidt said. “They told me you’d been

fired for spitting in a Russian lady's face. They never said what she had done to deserve spit in the face, but boy oh boy, it must have been bad, huh?"

Thomas's eyebrows went up, and he nodded, taking another drink.

"They told me to try you here, and here you sit," Schmidt continued. "A little early to be drinking, maybe, but what the hell?"

Thomas pounded the beer bottle to the bar and turned to face Schmidt. Beer frothed out onto his hand. He let go and slung the foam from his hand to the floor.

"What do you want?" Thomas said.

"I want to help."

"Fuck you, you want to help." Thomas grabbed his beer and turned back to the bar, only to set the beer back down and face Schmidt again. "I hear you finally got your disability retirement," he said, the corner of his mouth rising in a sneer. "Good for you. Now you can just keep on not helping people like always, and you can start with me by fucking off. I'm busy. Go talk to your shrink some more."

He saluted Schmidt and turned away, his eyes focused on the TV. "I needed your help two years ago," he said. "Two months ago. Two fucking jobs ago."

Schmidt's jaw clenched. Emotions roiled on his face. He settled and nodded his head. "He's back in town," he said. "They got him in a house on the east side. Waiting to testify on Monday. Lot's of guns,

some of which owe me . . . I got it so you can talk to him. Right now.”

Thomas turned and stared.

“He’s got nothing to tell you. There’s nothing you can do, Tommy. Nothing you could *ever* do. But I know you need to hear it from him for yourself. Because you’re an untrusting, ungrateful asshole. So, fuck you, too.” He stood and looked down at his hands. “I’ll be in the car . . . ten minutes.”

Thomas watched Schmidt leave. His eyes welled up and he swiped at the tears with the back of his hand. He fumbled with his wallet and dropped a couple of bills on the bar. He took a last hurried drag from his cigarette and rushed after Schmidt. Light washed into the bar as he left.

Schmidt drove, careful and observant. Thomas chewed his fingernails. He stopped chewing and stared straight ahead, his fingers still in front of his mouth. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Schmidt glanced over with no expression and looked back to the road with a nod. “I know.”

Thomas waited as if expecting more, but no more came. He went back to his manicure. Outside, it started to rain.

They drove up a tree-lined drive toward a small brick cottage. A very nice house sitting on very nice land. Agents in casual dress patrolled the yard. One agent waved them to park behind a row of vehicles beside the house.

Schmidt and Thomas get out and walked up. Before they reached the porch, the front door swung open and a tall, thin man wearing a bright Christmas sweater stepped out. He closed the door behind him and stood with his arms crossed.

“Special Agent in Charge Brian Alcott,” Schmidt said, indicating the sweater. “This is Thomas Patrick.”

Alcott didn’t offer his hand. Only a vague smile. “Paddington said you were coming, and why,” Alcott said. “I think he might be the last guy to owe you a favor, and I owe *him*, so I said ‘OK’. I don’t think anybody’s coming for Viktor anymore, anyway. He doesn’t talk to *me*, so what the fuck, right?”

An awkward silence settled as Schmidt and Alcott stared at each other. Alcott turned his stare to Thomas. “Well, you better get to it,” he said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder. “He’s all the way back in the kitchen. Straight through.”

Thomas nodded and started up the steps. He paused and looked back at Schmidt. “You’re not coming?” he asked.

“This isn’t for me, Tommy. This is for you. I stopped giving a shit a long time ago, remember? So, I’m going to stay out here and talk to a guy who can’t stand me, and we’re going to pretend everything is all right.”

“So, Merry Christmas,” Alcott said. “You got fifteen minutes.”

The house was crammed with lawn chairs, folding chairs, card tables, desks, and electronics. Faxes, phones, and computers. An agent sat in the living room playing Grand Theft Auto on an XBOX. He didn't look up when Thomas walked by.

In the kitchen, Viktor sat in a wheelchair by the window. His right leg was screwed into a stabilization cage. A heavy black brace was cinched around his left wrist. His hands were folded in his lap. He looked up when Thomas entered.

The right side of his face was good old Viktor. The left side was a long, puckered scar running from his hairline, through his ruined eye, and down into his upper lip.

He took Thomas in from shoes to forehead, his gaze stopping on the scar in his eyebrow. His face softened, and he pointed at the kitchen chair already slid out to face him.

Thomas walked in and sat, leaning forward, elbows on knees. Viktor offered a cigarette. Thomas took one and Viktor shook one out for himself. They both lit up and regarded each other through the smoke.

“You know,” Viktor said. “The doctor says I should sue, but the lawyer says I ain't got a leg to stand on.”

Thomas sat in shock, then burst out laughing. Viktor soon joined him and they both laughed, helpless and hysterical. Thomas ended in a coughing fit, and Viktor sobered, wiping tears from his eyes. He pointed to Thomas's scar, then to his own.

"I see they got you, too," he said.

Thomas reached up and rubbed his eyebrow and nodded. "Not like you," he said, "but, yeah. They got me, too."

"They say you found me. Called the squad."

"Yeah. I didn't stick around, though."

Viktor raised a hand and shook his head with a slight smile. "I don't blame you," he said. He took another drag and sighed out the smoke.

"They got you here to testify?" Thomas asked.

"Nah, that's just what *they* think, but I ain't gonna talk."

"You're gonna talk all right," shouted the agent from the living room.

"Hey fuck you, pig! I ain't saying shit," Viktor shouted. He turned to Thomas and leaned forward. "I'm not gonna talk, and my lawyer's almost got it where I can go home. I mean, I ain't in jail, but *damn*. I gotta let everybody know that I ain't a rat. Maybe I can just . . . you know . . . go home."

"They'll probably kill you," Thomas said. "Look what they done, already."

"Nah," Viktor said, waving it away. "This was all my fault. See, I had the book. Names. Dates. But that's it. I was so tired of being

treated like a piece of shit, I was gonna take the book and fuck ‘em with it. But there’s nothing hard in that book and everyone knows it . . . and I got caught up in all of it . . . and I got what I deserved.”

“*Nobody* deserves -”

“It don’t matter. I got nothing to tell you . . . I got nothing to say.” Viktor’s face grew intense, and he reached a few fingers into his brace and pulled out a scrap of paper. He palmed it against the pack of cigarettes and offered them to Thomas. “Have another cigarette,” he said.

Thomas grabbed the pack and shook one out. The note and the cigarette went into his jacket pocket. “I’ll save it for later, though,” he said.

“Suit yourself,” Viktor said. He shrugged and turned back to the window. “What kind of life I got either way? Get the fuck out of here.”

Thomas sat for a moment longer and watched Viktor close his eyes and cover his face with his hands. He got up and walked back through the house and out the front door. Alcott still stood with his arms crossed, looking at Thomas with a smug smile.

“My sentiments exactly,” he said.

Thomas read the note under the map lights in the visor. He ignored

Schmidt's looks and folded the note up and put it away. "Does this stay between us?" he asked.

"I can't guarantee that, Tommy."

Thomas sighed and closed his eyes.

"What did he say?" Schmidt asked.

"Nothing," Thomas said. "Nothing at all."

"Then what's on the paper?"

Thomas looked out the window, watching the lights in the rain.

"Do you need a passport to go to Jamaica?"

Schmidt's head snapped around, and he studied Thomas's face in the darkness.

## WHAT SHOULDN'T BE

Thomas drives along in his new car, smiling and drumming his hand on the wheel to the beat of a Boy George song. He rolls the window down and leans out to spit in the street. When he sits back up, he screams at what is beside him.

Sarah sits in the passenger seat, a rotting corpse. She reaches a friendly hand toward him and her face splits in a leering grin.

“I’ve missed you so much, Tommy,” she says, her voice like tearing paper.

Her hand grips him around the neck. The other hand comes up to join the other, and she chokes him, the terrible grin never changing.

“Now you don’t have to save me,” she says.

Her face twists into evil, and she launches herself at Thomas’s face, baring wicked teeth as she comes. Thomas screams through her hold, and her teeth sink into his cheek.

Thomas snapped awake in his window seat. His knee smacked the underside of his tray-table, and the empty can and pretzel bag went flying. The passenger next to him jumped and cringed aside.

“Jesus Christ, Buddy! What the fuck?”

Thomas looked at him with the horror in his face giving way to confusion. He shook his head and came fully awake.

“You trying to give me a heart attack?” the passenger continued.

“I had a nightmare.”

“You think?”

Thomas gathered his trash and put up a placating hand. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just . . .” He shrugged, and the passenger shook his head and went back to the SkyMall magazine. Thomas put the tray-table up and held the trash in his lap. He rubbed the rest of the sleep from his eyes and watched the ground rush up to meet the plane as they landed.

Thomas walked out of the airport carrying only a small bag and a leather date book. Both still had the price stickers on them. He struggled to get his sunglasses on with one hand, and a man with dark, oily skin walked up.

“Mr. Patrick?” he asked in a thick British accent.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, mistrust plain in his voice.

“I’m Robby Ruth. You got a car waiting.” Robby turned and walked away without looking to see if Thomas would follow. Thomas watched Robby’s back for a few moments. He pushed his sunglasses the rest of the way on his nose and rushed to catch up.

“How do you know my name?” he asked.

“Viktor called.”

“Viktor?”

“That’s right,” Robby said. “Viktor. He said an ugly white man with a scar on his face would be coming.” Robby stopped and spread his arms, looking around with a pointed look. “Lots of ugly white men,” he said. He pointed to Thomas. “Only one with a scar. I’ve been coming down here for days, mate. Thanks for finally showing.”

He started walking again, and Thomas followed him to a glistening Mercedes. Robby popped the trunk and took Thomas’s bag and dropped it in.

“Viktor saved my life once. You get the VIP treatment.” He shut the trunk and smiled. He hustled to the back door and opened it wide. Indicating the backseat with the sweep of his hand, he said, “Sir.”

Thomas swallowed his embarrassment and got in. Robby closed the door and hustled into the driver’s seat. He started the car and they pulled away.

Robby drove with a casual recklessness, his arm hanging out of the open window. “I hear he still has trouble with the family,” he said over his shoulder.

“No,” Thomas said. “I think he’ll be all right . . . Where are we going?”

“My place. It’s safe there.”

Thomas sat back and gave up, throwing his hands up and shaking his head. “So,” he said. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“Oh yeah. I’m gonna take care of everything. Get you some flash. Get you an appointment. Get your sister back.”

“You’ve seen her?” Thomas shouted, leaning forward.

Robby’s face fell, and he pulled over, throwing gravel, making pedestrians scatter. He put the Mercedes in Park and turned to face Thomas. “No, mate,” he said. “I ain’t seen her. And I don’t think I will. But there’s no sense in you not believing.”

Thomas sat back and cried, turning to look out the side window. Sorrow filled Robby’s face, and turned back to the wheel. He dropped the car into gear, and they pulled away.

Sarah sat facing Liza. She took Sarah’s hand in hers and stared into her face. Sarah looked back, calm and smiling.

“I need to know something,” Liza said. “It’s very important to

me.”

“What is it?”

Liza stood and began pacing. “If I don’t hear what I want,” she said, “I’m going to be very angry.”

She stopped and fixed Sarah with a glare and wrung her hands. Sarah rose and stepped toward her. Liza shied away, confused, but Sarah’s smile was reassuring. Sarah grabbed Liza’s hands and stilled them against her chest.

“I can’t be honest,” she said. “Not if you threaten me. I’ll only tell you what you want to hear if it’s the *truth*.” She pulled Liza’s fingertips up and kissed them one at a time. Liza gasped and snatched her hands back, crying. She stepped away and flapped her hands, nearing hysteria.

“I need to know if you love me,” she said in a choking whisper.

“What?” Sarah gaped up at her in confusion.

Liza’s face twisted from anxiety to rage and she rushed forward, wrapping her hands around Sarah’s throat, almost lifting her from her feet.

Grimacing, Sarah raised her hands and grabbed Liza’s wrists. She pulled Liza’s trembling hands away and kissed her fingertips again. She folded Liza’s hands in hers and nuzzled her cheek against them.

“Do you love me?” Liza whispered.

“Oh yes,” Sarah said. “*Very* much.”

Liza cried out and collapsed to her knees, crushing Sarah in a

desperate embrace. “I don’t want them to have you, anymore,” she said. “I want you to be mine.”

“I *am* yours. I’ll *always* be yours.”

“Do you promise?”

“It will be all right,” Sarah said, stroking her hair. Liza cried into Sarah’s shoulder.

Thomas stood in front of a mirror. He twisted one way and then the other, admiring his reflection. The haircut and manicure. The suit. He looked *rich*.

Robby came up behind him, a wide grin shining out from his face. “It’s on, mate,” he said. “Tomorrow at three. You’re and engineer in town, looking for some young fun.”

Panic spread across Thomas’s face. He stepped from the mirror and collapsed into a chair. “This is all so fast,” he said.

“Pleasure never waits here, mate.”

“How did you do this?”

“I told you,” Robby said. He walked over and sat in the chair next to Thomas. “I know everything and everyone. I can get what anybody needs, no matter what it is . . . I’m not a good man, Thomas. But I can do a good thing now and again.”

He reached up and gave Thomas an awkward pat on the

shoulder.

“We can all do good things, can’t we?” Thomas said.

Robby dropped his hand.

Thomas stood in the lobby, looking very sharp and relaxed. Except for the scar, is it the same man? Robby stood a few strides behind him, dark and imposing.

They both looked to the left as a door opened with the hiss of a pneumatic hinge. Thomas wrestled up a smile and extended his hand as Miles Van Den Bosch walked up with a Clark Gable smile and a Cary Grant handshake.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Patrick,” he said. His accent was plain and dry. “I hope Mr. Ruth hasn’t been leading you astray too much.”

“Not at all, sir,” Thomas said, amazed at his own poise. “He’s been perfect. And please, call me Thomas.”

“I’m sure. And I’m Miles.”

Miles led Thomas to a different door where he opened it with a gesture indicating Thomas to precede him. “I trust your flight was pleasant?”

Thomas walked through and Miles followed. Robby took a station by the door and stood, impassive. Thomas paused at Robby’s absence, but only when Miles nearly ran into him coming into the

office. Thomas recovered with a smile and stepped aside.

“Of course,” Thomas said. “I don’t particularly care to fly, but the destination certainly made it worth it.”

Miles came around and indicated a seat in front of the desk for Thomas to take. Both men sat and Miles leaned back with a measuring look.

“So, to business,” Miles said, his smile fading. “I don’t like this, Mr. Patrick. But, the man who vouches for you is a very important supporter of our little organization. Alexandre Soklov is a big man.”

“Alexandre? Not Viktor?”

Miles was taken aback. He shook his head. “Of course not *Viktor*,” he said, his mouth lifting in a sneer. “That man is a disgrace.” He leaned forward, his eyes intent. “You were expecting otherwise?”

“Just a mistake of information,” Thomas said, nonplussed. “It certainly explains the personal service.

Miles smiled again with what looked like genuine humor. “There’s nothing personal about my service, but I take your meaning. And now, I am leaving. I don’t usually do this. I have people, you see.”

He stood and puffed out his chest to help illustrate his importance. “I will send someone in to aid you,” he continued. “You are obviously not the man I thought.”

Thomas stood and offered his hand, but Miles dismissed it and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s not *your* money, is it?” he asked.

“No, it’s not.”

“I thought so .”

Miles walked away with a dramatic air. Thomas realized his hand was still out. He looked around, his confidence crumbling, and headed for the door just as it opened.

Liza entered wearing an extremely tight suit and carrying a leather portfolio. Her smile was open and beautiful, and Thomas smiled back, at ease.

“I hope Mr. Van Den Bosch wasn’t too priggish,” she said. Thomas fell in love with her voice. “He tends to overestimate himself.”

“No, it was all just a bit sudden.”

“We should really do this somewhere else, but I like making him wait.” She giggled and gave Thomas a conspiratorial pat, and sat in the chair next to the one Thomas had vacated. She crossed her legs with the portfolio on her lap and watched Thomas sit back down.

“That sounds fine to me,” Thomas said. He looked at her expectantly, but she did not respond. She stared at his face.

“Have we met?” she said. “This is embarrassing, but I feel as if I know you.”

“I don’t see how. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

She snorted laughter and put her hand on his knee. “Please, if you got this far, you’re no stranger to anything like this.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I usually am,” she said. “My goodness, but you look familiar.”

She shook her head and opened the portfolio. She turned it around for him to see and placed it on his lap. She slid herself closer and kept her hand on his knee. “So now, you just pick a girl,” she said.

“That’s it?”

“Unless you want to tell me what you’re in to. I can help with your choice that way. It’s *fun*.”

Thomas felt warm. He cleared his throat and concentrated on the faces in the book. Female and male. Children. “That’s all right,” he said. “I think I can make my own choice.”

“Of *course* you can.”

Thomas scanned the pages. “I’ve been here for years,” Liza said. “I started as a face in that book as a matter of fact.”

Thomas kept looking. Liza seemed unaware that he was ignoring her. “I worked hard. We all do. Even Mr. Van Den Bosch. And I’ve helped many, many men make their decisions. Some men just don’t know what they want when they’re suddenly given whatever they could have.”

Thomas stopped, transfixed. He reached out and caressed the page. Sarah looked out at him from the portfolio. So small.

“Ah, my little flower,” she whispered. She reached out and pulled the portfolio from his unresisting hands. “I’ve found that the first choice is almost always the best. You seem to have made yours, and it’s a very good choice indeed.”

Thomas didn’t notice her smile fade. Didn’t see the anger

clouding her eyes. “Are you quite sure?” she asked.

“She’s so beautiful.”

“Yes, she is. A little older than some, but everything you could want otherwise.”

“Thank you. I want her tonight.” He looked up, and she schooled her face back to ingratiating kindness.

“I’ll see to it and contact your man outside when it’s all set. Is payment pre-arranged.?”

“Yes, whatever you want.”

“My, *my*. She made an impact. She’ll be pleased.” She rose and offered Thomas her hand. He took it and stood, straightening his suit. Liza reached up and adjusted his tie and patted his face. “Come,” she said, “I’ll see you out.”

They walked through the door arm in arm and meet back up with Robby who fell into step behind them. She walked him to the door exiting the lobby and released his arm. Thomas turned toward her, still in a daze.

“Tell Sarah that I’ll be here for her tonight,” he said.

“I will,” Liza said with a smile. “You have a good day until then.”

Thomas and Robby walked out. Neither man saw her stare with hatred at Thomas’s back or heard her whisper, “Sarah.”

They sat in silence as Thomas cried. He wiped the tears away and looked down at the digital voice recorder in his hand. Robby looked at Thomas in the rearview mirror. His face was tight with concern.

Thomas dropped the recorder into a large padded envelope. It was already addressed. Postage applied. He jumped out of the car and entered the lobby of his hotel. He walked to the front desk and slid the envelope into the hotel's mail drop. He took a deep breath and turned away.

Sarah sat at her mirror, staring at her reflection. Liza burst in, and Sarah jumped up to meet her. Liza brushed her aside and jerked open the vanity drawer. She turned the meager contents out onto the bed and threw the drawer aside.

Sarah came to her in protest, trying to protect her few possessions. Liza turned on her and bore down with a fierce expression.

Sarah relented, and Liza turned back to the bed. She dropped down and ran her hands through the belongings of a lost little girl. A small stuffed teddy bear keychain. Some notes scribbled to friends long forgotten. Odds and ends and pictures.

Liza stopped with a gasp and held up a picture. A picture of Thomas. A few years younger and no scar, but easily recognizable.

She clutched the picture to her chest and sobbed in great rending gasps.

Sarah, frightened and confused, approached and placed her hand on Liza's shoulder. Liza spun and pulled Sarah into a fierce embrace, burying her face in Sarah's chest. Tentative, Sarah stroked Liza's hair and tried to see what was in her hand. Liza raised her smeared face.

"He's coming to take you away," she said.

"Who?"

"He's going to take you away from me."

Liza grabbed Sarah's hand and gave her the crumpled picture. Disbelief filled Sarah's face and her hands fell to her side. "Tommy?" she said. "He's here?"

"He can't take you away. *He* doesn't love you. *I* love you."

"You should thank him," Sarah said.

Liza stood with fury twisting her face. "Thank him for taking you away?" she cried.

"No," Sarah said. She dropped the picture and reached for Liza's hands. She pulled Liza's arms around her and fell against her waist. "He never loved me," she continued, "or he would have saved me *then*. He let them take me and now it's too late. You should thank him for bringing me to *you*."

Realization flooded Liza's face to be replaced by joy as she lowered to the bed with Sarah in her arms. They cried and rocked and comforted each other as best they could. A bitter little girl and

her lover. Both still children despite the lives they had led.

Thomas walked out of the hotel, fresh and dapper, still in character. He took a few steps and stopped in his tracks. The driver's door of the Mercedes was open. Robby was gone. He looked around and froze when he saw Michael and Daniel. He only reacted when they got right up on him.

He lashed out, driving his knee into Daniel's balls. Daniel crumpled against Michael, and Thomas sprinted away. Michael recovered and gave chase.

Thomas rounded the corner of the hotel into the alley just a half a step too slow. Michael got a grip on Thomas's collar and dragged him down to his back. Thomas's feet left the ground and he landed flat on the hot asphalt.

Thomas pulled Thomas to his feet and slammed him against the wall. Daniel lumbered around the corner, hunched over and wheezing. He stepped up to Thomas and Michael backed away. Daniel pulled a pistol from beneath his jacket and slammed it across the bridge of Thomas's nose.

Thomas heard the crunch as his nose broke. Felt the alley rush up to meet him. Welcomed the darkness as he passed out.

Thomas knelt on the floor of an empty warehouse. His nose was grotesque. His eyes dark and swollen. Daniel sat in a chair, slouching and looking a little green. Michael stood with his hands clasped in front of him.

Approaching footsteps brought Thomas around. Liza and Sarah walked out of the shadows. Thomas gasped and cried out. Inarticulate joy.

Sarah ran the last few steps and threw herself into his arms. He rocked back as he took her weight and sobbed into her hair. She loosened her grip and pulled back to look into his ruined face. “Why weren’t you there, Tommy?” she asked.

His face twisted with grief. “I’m so sorry,” he cried. “God, Sarah, I’m so sorry.”

She struggled free of his grip and took a step back. “You weren’t *there.*”

She slapped him with everything she had. His head rocked back and he reeled, falling over. Dazed with fresh blood running down his cheeks to mix with his tears, he watched Sarah run back to Liza.

Liza folded Sarah into her arms and smirked at Thomas over Sarah’s head. She glanced over to Michael and nodded. She turned to leave and pulled Sarah back into the shadows.

After a moment, they were caught in a silhouette as the door opened, the dock lights shining in. The door closed, and they were gone.

Thomas struggled back up and stared at the closed door. His face

was twisted with confusion and grief. He didn't notice the barrel against his head.

## WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN

Viktor sat in his wheelchair, his leg still in the cage. The apartment was clean and bright. The curtains were thrown back, washing Viktor in light. An overflowing ashtray sat beside him. A phone in his lap. A padded envelope with a digital voice recorder next to it.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror next to him, studying the good side of his face. He turned his head to reveal the mutilation and closed his eyes. He picked up the phone.

Schmidt loaded up boxes as he got ready for his retirement. He paused here and there to study a photo or a file, but they all went into a box.

The phone rang, and he answered with exasperation. “Schmidt here,” he said. “It better be good.”

The silence extended for so long that Schmidt looked up at the

ceiling with an imploring expression, ready to hang up. Viktor's voice was so tired. "I'm ready to talk, now," he said.

Schmidt's legs gave out, and he dropped into his chair amidst boxes full of mementos from a wasted career.

THE END