

Happy Trails

Oriana Rivera had a secret.

She was no good at keeping them. The corners of her lips pointed in a goofy way, her head bopped as if grooving to some non-existent hip hop music, and her whole body simmered and shook like jiffy popcorn held over a campfire.

I pretended not to notice the powder keg she was sitting on. I didn’t like to ask questions before I had some idea of the answer.

“You have an appointment,” she said. “A walk-in. He’s waiting in your office.”

No cause for celebration there. I had appointments all the time, and was yet to find one that left me with anything but a headache. The Catch-22 of my job was that I was always stuck between the surveillant and the surveilled, neither of whom ever had good, uncomplicated intentions. The clients who kept food in my belly and Netflix on my TV were the same ones who kept me up at night, wondering if I should walk away from it all and go into a more respectable business, like telemarketing or porn. A part of me despises anyone who’d walk through the door with another dirty deed for me to put on my conscience.

Clients show up thinking they’re in a movie: men wanna be wise guys, women wanna be femme fatales—they want me to be a hardboiled detective who cracks cases in 24 hours all while maintaining movie star good looks and delivering a slick one-liner or two. Walk-ins are a particular pain. They combine these delusions with a sense of entitlement you could only find in somebody who’d show up unannounced on a Monday morning. Already I could guess today’s walk-in was white, most likely a man, definitely upper-middle class.

Oriana hated their ilk as much as I did. So why was she so happy?

Her desk contained a laptop, a Frappuccino, textbooks, and mountains of crinkled papers with messy scribe.

“Something you wanna tell me?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said, though her grin said otherwise.

“You look like you’re keeping bees in your mouth, Ori. Go on and spit them out.”

She glanced at my office door. “You ever watch that show *Happy Harley*?”

The one about the orphan girl learning to love and live with her new adopted family. It existed in the arcadia world of network TV sitcoms, where all problems could be solved in 22 minutes plus commercials, and every crisis ended with a wholesome life lesson rather than, from my experience, more questions.

“My ex-wife loved that show,” I said. “I don’t get why. It’s the whitest post-segregation sitcom this city’s ever made, and it’s cheesier than a bag of Cheetos. She always wanted me to watch it with her, but honestly, I’d rather watch an amateur vasectomy.”

Oriana’s smile faded. “I mean, I kinda like it...”

That’s when I noticed the *Happy Harley* keychain she had, the *Happy Harley* laptop stickers, the *Happy Harley* T-shirt, how she wore her black hair in a high ponytail the way Harley did.

Gone was the giddiness lifting her through this gray Monday morning. Now it was just her, a messy desk, and a shit-ton of work for her to waste her youth away sifting through.

“The walk-in’s been waiting a while,” she said without looking at me.

“Right, thank you.”

“Happy to help, Mr. Wise.”

Mr. Wise. Oh yeah, she was pissed at me.

The walk-in met all my expectations—except one. He was indeed a white man, though based on his Rolex watch, tailored Italian suit, and satisfied smirk, he was a cut above the usual upper-middle classers who normally graced me with their presence.

He sat in my chair with his feet on the desk. He had taken the wedding photo I the drawer out of its frame, and smiled as he read the writing on the back. He glanced out the window at the strip club next door, his face blue then red then green in the flashing neon light that bathed my office and kept rent affordable.

The right side of his mouth curled upwards when he saw me in the doorway

“This your wife?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said. “Previous tenants left that there.”

He kept his curling smile and wriggled his feet on my desk, like he wanted me to shine them. I sat in one of the chairs my clients usually sit on. Everything in the office looked different from this angle. The documents, tangle of cords, magazines, and empty Chinese take-out boxes strewn everywhere seemed so natural sitting behind the desk. In front, the place seemed kinda unprofessional.

“You got a bride on your desk,” he said. “But no ring on your finger. Mismatch the ring, or mismatch the bride?”

“Both are exactly where I want them.”

His smirk gave way, revealing for the first time a real emotion not masked by yuppie smugness: annoyance and a feeling of belittlement. When he sat in my chair, put his feet on my desk, messed with my wedding photo, he had expected to get a rise out of me. By not taking the bait I had thrown him completely off his game plan.

"Gotta say," he said, "I'm less than impressed here. You show up an hour late to your own business, leaving me to wallow in this cesspool of a neighbourhood. This office is crawling with vermin, the building's falling apart, that Latina girl out there didn't project an air of professionalism, and frankly, Mr. Wise, neither do you."

"Save it for Yelp," I said. "If you wanted a professional's professional you'd go to the Hills. When you go to Skid Row, you get what Skid Row gives you. There's nothing original about what you're doing here: you had such a hard time locating me, you're hoping the press will have the same problems. If I had a guess, I'd say it's your job to handle celebrity problems by letting people like me handle them."

The walk-in wet his lips. When I first saw him, I would've pegged him as being in his mid 20s. The more I looked at him, the more a middle-aged man looked back. The Botox, facelifts, and litany of so-called anti-aging creams had turned his face into an uncanny valley of tight, plastic skin.

He set the wedding photo down and took his feet off the desk.

"Let's start over," he said. "I'm Seth Davidov. I'm a producer on *Happy Harley*—I'm sure you're familiar. Harley Harbor didn't show up for a shoot last night, and we haven't been able to locate her. We told the media she's at home sick, but she's no doubt on another one of her infamous benders. I'm sure you're familiar with those too."

I was more familiar with Harley Harbor's wild antics than the show itself. Whether I was flicking through channels or standing in lines at grocery stores, I couldn't escape the poor girl. Everywhere you looked there was a paparazzi photo of her with sunglasses or a hat or a hoodie, trying to hide her identity to no avail. It didn't matter if it was Harley leaving a bar, Harley checking into rehab, Harley picking her niece up from school—they all carried bold accusatory headlines and ol' Happy Harley had the look of a woman on the edge.

But from what I picked up through social osmosis, it seemed Harley had made progress. The last I had heard of her was when a woman in my AA group cited the star's journey to sobriety as an inspiration to her. News that Harley was back on the bottle would've devastated my AA acquaintance.

"What's her poison?" I asked.

"Rum and coke," Davidov said. "*cain*, that is. And heroine too."

"That's a mean three-headed monster. You think she might've OD'd?"

“She’s probably just screwing around somewhere. Her body processes smack like it’s water.”

He leaned forward and his voice ran cold.

“But if, god forbid, the worst comes to pass and you find her in a... *compromised* position, I trust you’ll do whatever you can to *un-compromise* it to some extent. You know, make it more palatable to her fans.”

Harley Harbor found dead in her bed was a lot more family-friendly than Harley Harbor found dead on a public toilet.

“Any usual hangout spots for her?” I asked.

“She’s not the type to be a regular anywhere,” Davidov said.

“Any fellow users she associates with?”

“Not the type to keep people around too long either.”

“So you have nothing.”

Davidov simply tapped a folder sitting on my desk.

“In here are addresses and phone numbers of Harley’s friends and family. Much of the show’s cast and crew are there too. Feel free to take a minute out of any one of their days to ask questions. Just stay away from the studio—we can’t have the paparazzi noticing something’s up.”

He got up from my chair, buttoned his jacket, and put sunglasses on.

“Find her in 12 hours and we’ll pay triple your usual rates,” he said on his way out the door. “Oh, and one last thing: do us all a favor and leave Harley’s parents out of this.”

He opened the door, and Oriana, who had her ear pressed against it the entire time, came tumbling into the room. Rather than catching her, Davidov side-stepped just in time to watch her crash into the carpet at a safe distance. Behind his shades, he revealed no emotion. But the way he looked down at Ori, then to me, then down at Ori, and back to me, made it clear he was already second-guessing his decision to hire a Skid Row investigator for a Hollywood job.

I wanted to admonish Oriana for yet again eavesdropping on my conversation with a client. But after I had hurt her feelings trashing the show she loved so much, I let it slide this time. After I helped her off the floor and the producer was gone, I put on a cup of coffee and asked her to take a seat.

She sat down with the look of a kid called into the principle’s office and watched me pour cream and sugar into my mug with big puppy dog eyes.

"The answer's no," I said.

"I didn't ask a question."

"You're gonna ask to come along 'cuz you wanna meet Harley Harbor."

"C'mon, Eli! When will I ever get this chance again?"

"You should hope never. Think about it like this: if we find her blitzed in a bar bathroom puking her stomach out, you'll never be able to watch the show the same way again. Why ruin something you like?"

She clapped her hands together and lowered her hands as if praying Our Father.

"Please!" she begged. "You've always promised you'd let me ride along on a case one day, and this one would be perfect! It's safe, simple, and something I can help with! I may not know her personally, but I know all about her career, and that can be useful! Please!"

"I don't know..."

"Please!"

I took a long swig of coffee to leave her in suspense. If I didn't let her come, she'd never forgive me. If my first and hopefully only marriage had taught me anything, it's that women prepare their bodies for carrying children by carrying grudges.

When I decided she'd had enough suspense, I said, "Fine," and watched as a smile stole her face. "But don't blame me if the experience leaves you just as jaded as I am."

"Where should we start?" she asked.

"That producer prick said to stay away from Harley's parents... So what better place to begin?"

The producer didn't include Mr. and Mrs. Harbor's information in the contacts folder he left with me. The only way I could obtain their address was to call my freelance "journalist" friend, Adeline Jane.

The reason "journalist" is in quotes is because she came about as close to winning the Pulitzer Prize as Flavor Flav came to winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Most of her pieces wound up on the racks of grocery store checkout lines and dentist office coffee tables. While we're at it I might as well throw "friend" in quotes too because despite our relatively short history in each other's lives, she was too often the driving force behind many of my worst decisions.

"Eli," Adeline Jane answered. "These booty calls just keep getting earlier and earlier."

"I just need information," I said. "You at your computer? I need an address for Harley Harbor's parents."

As the most prolific celebrity stalker in the city, Adeline had a database full of information on celebs and their associates that you couldn't find on Wikipedia. She knew what toothpaste Tom Hanks brushed his teeth with, what pajamas Snoop Dogg wore to bed, how many times a day Scarlett Johansson went to the washroom.

"85 Royal Oak," she said without hesitation, without sass, without ultimatums, only a few clicks on her keyboard.

"Um, thanks."

"You're welcome,"

Silence sat on the line for a moment.

"You're not gonna ask why I need that info?" I asked.

"Would you tell me?"

"Well, no..."

"Well, there it is."

She hung up.

Because I was an idiot, I thought that was the end of it.

We hopped into my beat-up old convertible and were on our way. In the passenger seat, Ori went through the folder Davidov had left me. There was a photo of Harley sitting at the end of a bar of some dingy dive, alone and with a red cocktail in front of her. The writing on the back read, *Harley last seen Sunday night in a bar in Mar Vista. Photo found on social media.*

"She's really drinking again," Oriana said sadly. "I thought she cleaned herself up..."

"Happy Harley and Harley Harbor are two very different people," I said. "Hold that in your head."

"Shouldn't we go to this bar first?"

"We'll get there eventually. Checking out the parents is more important now."

"You really think they'd know where she'd go on a bender?"

"Course not. But telling us to avoid them is just too weird. Here's what you gotta understand about clients, Ori: their intentions are never pure."

Harley's parents lived in an itsy bitsy house in Santa Monica. The neighbourhood reminded me of one of those model towns the military dropped atomic bombs on in the 50s. The bungalows were small and colorful with one-car garages and beautiful gardens. Everywhere you looked you saw white-haired retirees going on walks, playing checkers on park benches, reading newspapers on front porches—really living life on the edge. The

community must have been a popular dumping ground for celebrity parents. Driving through the neighborhood was like seeing what the Oscars would look like in a few decades with older, more tired versions of some of Hollywood’s hottest stars.

We parked in front of Mr. and Mrs. Harbor’s house and approached the front door. An elderly woman—though still younger than most of the retirees in the community—answered the door, and I knew right away we had gotten the right house. Mrs. Harbor was the splitting image of her daughter, albeit aged a few years with wrinkles around her eyes and mouth and streaks of gray in her blond hair. The big hemp garden hat and dirt-specked apron she wore hung off her boney frame. A look of distress fell upon her as soon as she saw me.

“You’re not a journalist, are you?” she said.

“No, ma’am,” I said. “I’m Eli Wise. Harley’s producer hired me to look out for her. Can we come inside?”

“Of course.”

She led us into the living room. On the way through the house we passed a trophy case bursting with accolades from pageants, drama showcases, and modelling work. The awards were more impressive when I checked the dates and found that Harley had won them all before turning 10.

In the living room, there was a similarly aged man asleep on the recliner, an episode of *The Price is Right* going unwatched in front of him. On the coffee table was an open photo album. While Mrs. Harbor fixed us something to drink, Oriana flipped through it without shame.

“Wow, this is pre-season one Harley,” she said. “She was so cute!”

“At least try to fake some objectivity,” I said.

“C’mon, Eli. Look at her little face.”

Even my cold heart couldn’t stop from twisting at the sight. She had this little round pink face like a peach, a smile bigger than her face that turned her eyes into near slits, and shimmering blue eyes that had the world in them.

Mrs. H returned with two glasses of water on a couch adjacent to us.

“Harley’s not in trouble, is she?” she asked.

“Only the type she’s used to,” I said. “She didn’t show up for a shoot this morning, and nobody’s been able to get a hold of her. Davidov thinks she’s on one of her benders.”

She took her hat off and held it on her lap.

"Not possible," she said with quiet conviction. "Harley... she's had her demons, but she's worked so hard to put them away. The AA meetings, the stints in rehab, she even started going to church every now and then. There's just no way she'd go back on that stuff. She's closed that chapter of her life."

I believed that she believed every word. But parents had a nasty habit of thinking their kids better than they are. She also spoke like someone whose knowledge of addiction came from only a passing glance. As a fool who stopped his life dead in its tracks to take a good long look at it, I knew addiction wasn't just an episode but a recurring character.

She needed a wake-up call. Removing the photo of Harley in the Mar Vista bar from Davidov's folder, I placed it on the coffee table next to the photo of her younger self.

"This was taken last night," I said. "She's in a bar with a Bloody Mary in her hand."

Mrs. Harbor studied the photo with disbelieving eyes.

"That's not a Bloody Mary," she said. "It's a Shirley Temple. Harley loves them."

I held in an exhale and suppressed an eyeroll.

"Hard to tell," I conceded. "So why wouldn't she show up for the shoot? She tryna make indie movies now or something?"

"She just signed on for 10 more seasons," Oriana said.

Mrs. H's eyes looked to something on the far wall above the fireplace. I followed her gaze to a framed certificate in Harley's name from the New York Performing Arts Academy.

"No, she loves the show..." Mrs. Harbor said contemplatively. "She *is* the show... Yes, there was a time she considered leaving it for something else, but we decided staying on was best for her career. She's glad she did."

"Then what happened to her?" Ori asked.

The hat on her lap had been crumpled nearly into a ball. Her hands were clenched in fists and shaking.

"Something terrible," she said. "Something terrible must've happened."

She reached for a rotary phone on a table next to a flower vase. My hand collapsed on hers before she got it off the receiver.

"Let go of me, Mr. Wise. My daughter could be in danger."

"Could be, Mrs. H. Could Be."

She glared at me. I took my hand off hers.

“I understand your concern,” I said. “But calling the police now would only create a media circus. Funny things get around in circuses—it’d only make it harder to track her down. Leave it to me and I’ll have her home safe by the end of the day. You have my word.”

She placed the phone back on the receiver.

“Fine,” she said. “Just please keep me updated.”

She reached into a flower vase next to the phone and pulled out a key attached to a fob.

“They’re for Harley’s house,” she said, handing them over. “The fob will deactivate the security system.”

“Assuming there *is* some foul play here... did Harley have enemies?”

“Of course not. She could be rash at times, a poor decision maker, but people loved her. She lit up a room, always a joy to work with, low maintenance, treated everyone with respect...”

She thought for a moment.

“The only thing I can think of is her boyfriend, Artie Bowers.”

“He plays Chuckie on the show,” Oriana said to me. “They’ve been together a long time. It was a little weird at first ‘cuz they play siblings on the show, but we all got over it.”

“Trouble behind the scenes?” I asked Mrs. Harbor.

“Unfortunately,” she said.

“Was he ever violent with her?”

“Nothing like that. He never hit her as far as I know, but a few times he grabbed her so hard he left bruises. The two argued all the time.”

“They seemed so happy in interviews,” Ori said.

Was this why Davidov didn’t want me talking to Harley’s parents? He was afraid of them telling me this?

“Did Harley speak to you about her troubles often?” I asked.

“I’m her mother. Her sobriety, her relationships, her career, she told me everything about all of it. We’re very close.”

Oriana and I thanked her for her hospitality and she walked us to my car. As I placed Harley’s Beverly Hills address in Google Maps and groaned at the hour plus traffic travel time, I wondered just how close Harley and her mother truly were that she would buy her a house so far away. We spent our time sitting in LA traffic discussing Mrs. Harbor’s claims.

“The mom says Harley’s clean,” Ori said. “But the producer doesn’t seem to buy the reformed addict story. Who should we believe?”

“We don’t need to choose sides,” I said. “If you get two conflicting reports, the truth often lies somewhere in the middle. They both fancy themselves experts on our girl, but it seems like even the people who knew Harley, only knew *of* her. That’s why we’re heading to her house... to get to know the real Harley Harbor.”

The drive to Beverly Hills was a long one. Normally I used my time in traffic to listen to audiobooks, but if Oriana knew I listened to the likes *Awaken the Giant Within*, *Eat Pray Love*, and *The Power of Positive Thinking*, she’d never look at me the same way again. So instead of enriching my mind, the long trip was consumed instead with Oriana talking about Harley’s stupid sitcom.

“How’d you even get into that show?” I asked. “You were a fetus when it first came out.”

“Before I came to this country, my dad would send VHS tapes back to us in Mexico,” she said. “Watching *Happy Harley* was how I learned to speak English. I thought all American girls were as kind as her.”

“Then you got here.”

“Then I got here, and well... A shy little Latina girl with a bowl cut and second-hand clothes in a school full of pretty little rich white girls? Yeah, the other kids weren’t so nice. No one liked me and school sucked, but when I watched that show, things didn’t seem so bad. Even though I had no friends... well, it kinda felt like Harley was my friend. I felt like I knew her better than any of the kids at school.”

Now that I thought about it, my ex-wife would watch that show after bad days—of which she had many. She’d sit down sour, and as the 22-minute show went on, her frown would bend into something resembling a smile.

Harley’s home was at the top of a hill in a rich neighbourhood. The kind of neighborhood you couldn’t work your way into, but only inherit through blood or a stroke of cosmic luck. My foot pumped on the gas, lugging my decaying convertible up the steep road, praying it wouldn’t stall like it was known to do and send us barrelling into what was probably some Laker players’ house.

We reached the top and used the fob to get through the gate. There was a drought in California, but you wouldn’t know it heading up the driveway past the Greek statues spraying water through their sculpted genitals on a lush green lawn. The mansion was modern with an open concept. There was something dollhouse-like about the arrangement of furniture, the decorations, even the wallpaper.

As we walked up the front steps, we came upon a basket of violets with a bottle of red sitting amongst the flowers. They cradled a handwritten letter as well.

Harley,

I see the real you, and it's beautiful

Life without you is not computable

When I fear, it's you I hold tight

When you're near, everything feels right

-A.B

"Didn't know Artie Bowers was into poetry," Oriana said.

"Poetry doesn't seem all too into him, though," I said.

"As if you could do better."

"Maybe this is an apology for an outburst. A violent one maybe."

"Eli, you'd see a shooting star and wonder what it's running away from."

"The guy gave his alcoholic girlfriend wine as a gift. At best he's a moron, at worst..."

She didn't wanna hear the rest. The key got us through the door and the fob deactivated the SaiTech security system. Oriana took her first steps inside the way a child enters Disneyland: eyes wide and on a swivel. Harley had set up displays like something out of a museum throughout the main floor. Oriana approached each with giddy enthusiasm, shouting "Eli! Eli!" to get my attention but failing to capture my interest in the slightest.

"This is the bike she learned to ride in season one episode 7!" she'd cry. "And this is the gun from season 12 episode 13 where she talked that loner kid out of shooting up the school! Man, that was a dark episode... Oh! And this is the dress from season 8 episode 22. The one she wore to prom!"

The only exhibit that caught my eye was a baseball signed by Jackie Robinson. My father had loved Jackie Robinson as much as he loved Jesus. Perhaps more considering that Dad never bought any Jesus merchandise.

I took a picture, and was about to send it to my brother when Oriana appeared behind me.

"Season 17 Episode 15," she said.

"Quoting the episodes doesn't impress me, Ori. If anything, I think less of you for it."

"That's from the episode where Harley finds Jackie Robinson's old equipment and gains his talent for playing baseball. And civil rights activism."

“Isn’t this supposed to be a slice of life sitcom? What’s this *Like Mike* shit?”

“When you have 20 plus seasons you gotta mix it up every now and then.”

Her massive bookcase was filled with the likes of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and countless other theatre classics. On the walls were posters from Harley’s non-*Happy Harley* projects. A dark gritty reboot of *Home Alone*, an all-female remake of *Revenge of the Nerds*, a film adaptation of *Mein Kampf*, and one of those Jim Crow period pieces where a rich white lady ends racism by befriending one of her black servants.

Sitting on the living room coffee table was a newspaper turned to a review of her most recent film. The critic wrote, *Harley Harbor has blossomed from child star to superstar, but even as she leaves childish things behind, she cannot quite escape the round face and dimpled smile that tugged our heartstrings for so many years in her beloved sitcom. Watching her in a serious role is like watching your son’s elementary school production of Long Day’s Journey Into Night: no matter how heavy the subject matter, no matter how well done the execution, there’s a metaphysical dissonance that pulls one away from those swirling dark clouds and into the bosom of memories from an innocent idyllic time where Harley’s smile could get you through the thickest of days. As she moves through her 30s, perhaps Harbor’s best chance for survival is with feel-good comedies, her natural habitat of which she is the apex predator.*

High functioning addicts never left signs of their use where company could see it. I went upstairs and started with obvious hiding places: dresser drawers, closets, under the bed, medicine cabinets... nothing. Then I tried more obscure places like inside toilet tanks, fridge salad drawers, and Pringles cans. I turned the place upside down searching for anything and found nothing.

Nothing besides 13 coins on her night table.

Deciding that Mrs. Harbor had been right about her daughter, I headed downstairs to find Ori. She was still gallivanting around the main floor.

I found her standing mesmerized in front of a trophy case filled with Emmys, Golden Globes, SAG awards, and oddly enough, an NAACP Image award for that Jackie Robinson episode.

“I still can’t believe I’m in Harley Harbor’s house,” she said. She inhaled deeply through her nose and wrinkled it. “It doesn’t smell the way I thought it would.”

The smell wafting from deep inside the house was of flowers with a bitter tinge. I followed the smell to the garage. There was no car—Harley must’ve taken it. Sitting against the wall were two big garbage bags filled to burst. Ori untied the knot keeping it all together, and a field’s worth of flowers poured onto the floor. Lilies, roses, daffodils, sunflowers, tulips... Some were only a few days old, showing only the lightest signs of wilt, while others were succumbing to old age, turning black and stinking the place up. Amongst the flowers were cards with poetry as poor as the one we found outside.

*I don't believe the lies they tell about you
They say you're no good, a junkie without a clue
Why don't they see you for what you truly are?
An angel, a queen, a goddess without par*

They were all signed A.B.

Oriana was visibly upset as she dug through the flowers to retrieve each card. There had to be at least 20 of them. "Artie pours his heart into words for you, and you throw them in the trash? That's not like Harley at all."

The doorbell rang, startling us both. I went to the front and checked the terminal camera. Parked at the gate was a silver Corvette with a head poking out the driver window. It wasn't one I wanted to see.

But because she was blocking my way out, I had no choice but to buzz her in. Ori and I watched as the Corvette drove up the long driveway and parked next to my convertible. A woman wearing a hot pink blouse paired with a white skirt and boots got out the car. She removed her sunglasses and flipped back her dirty blond hair to reveal a freckled face and amber eyes pretty enough to hide ugly intentions.

Adeline Jane leaned on the hood of her car as Ori and I descended the front steps.

"This is why I like you, Eli," she said. "Trouble follows you like you owe it money."

"And what do I owe you that keeps you coming back?" I asked.

"A favor. I gave you the Harbors' address and now you owe me an angle."

When it came to tracking down a good "story," she had the will of a bull chasing red. So long as her horns were pointing in the right direction, she could be a helpful force.

I tossed Oriana my keys.

"Park a little ways past the gate," I told her. "Keep a good view of the house. I need you here in case Harley comes back."

"Roger that," Ori said, and headed for my convertible.

I got into the Corvette with Adeline and told her to head for a film studio out by Toluca Lake. We were on the highway when I finally decided to let her in the kitchen.

"Swear you won't go public about this until the cheque clears," I said.

"I swear on my integrity as a journalist."

"Swear on something else."

"Just tell me, Eli."

"Harley Harbor's been missing since last night. Seth Davidov thinks she fell off the wagon and gave me 12 hours to find her. But here's the thing: I checked the house and there's no evidence she's been using again. She's got a sobriety coin for every color of the rainbow by her nightstand."

Adeline twisted her lips in contemplation.

"So what happened to her?"

"Don't know, but Artie Bowers has been showering her with gifts, and she's been showering the trash with them."

"There's been talk of turbulence along the grapevine."

"Harley's mom said he's gotten violent before."

"Have you spoken to him yet?"

"That's where we're going now."

Once we reached the Toluca Lake area, I asked her to drop me off at the Starbucks a few blocks away.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"No good," I said. "They probably got Dead or Alive posters of you all over that lot. I'll use my pal Seth Davidov's name to get inside and speak to Bowers. In the meantime, I need you to visit the bar in Mar Vista where Harley was last seen. We'll rendezvous after."

I handed her the producer's folder. She flipped through it and nodded.

"Keep me posted," she said.

I treated myself to a caramel macchiato, and sipped it as I strolled casually up to the lot's entrance. The guard was a graying gentleman with a flabby face, glasses on the tip of his nose, and the look of a man a few paycheques away from retirement. Showing him my ID, I told him Davidov had demanded to see me. He made some calls and told me to wait. Half to pass time, half for the case, I chatted with him a bit.

"You ever see Harley Harbor around here?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "This is where they film the show. Been seeing her since she was yay high."

"With actors, you always wonder if what you see on TV is what you get."

"Oh she's just as advertised. Always got a nice smile when she comes around here."

"Funny you'd say that 'cuz I didn't get that impression from her. Few months back, she actually cut me off in traffic. Flipped the bird at me too."

"No, no, Harley wouldn't do that," he said.

"Oh yeah? Doesn't she drive a red Camaro?"

"She drives a yellow Tesla."

"Aaah, must've been a lookalike then."

I took out my phone and texted a friend of mine from my LAPD days. I asked her to check for anything involving a yellow Tesla. Tickets, roadside stops, accidents... anything that could point us towards our girl.

A little after that, Seth Davidov came riding in on a golf cart. His sunglasses were on and he didn't look happy. Following close behind were 2 security guards gliding on Segways scooters.

"What did I tell you, Wise?" the producer said.

"I need to talk to Artie Bowers."

"Call him. I don't want you around here."

The guards got off their scooters and approached with the intent to usher me off the premises. They grabbed me by the arms, and though my first instinct was to put them on the concrete, I knew it would cost me my caramel macchiato.

"Hey Davidov," I called out as he was turning the cart around to peel away. "Harley's parents are such nice people. TMZ would love them."

He hit the brakes and looked at me, his sunglasses keeping his thoughts veiled. His lips were pressed into a thin white line and his head shook slightly with frustration. He tapped twice on the horn to get the guards' attention and told them to leave me. After the guards backed off, he smacked the passenger's seat next to him, and I climbed in.

"Harley's been clean for a year now," I said as we drove through the lot. "She's not on a bender, she could be in real trouble."

"Did you even look in the folder I gave you? She was drinking a Bloody Mary."

"Her mom says it was a Shirley Temple."

"This is exactly why I didn't want you talking to Mrs. Harbor. Every time Harley has one of her episodes, she insists there's something sinister going on, and every time she's wrong. The woman is in denial about her daughter's addiction. She's not gonna go to the cops, is she?"

I studied his face.

"No," I said, and watched with disgust as relief eased into his mug.

"Good," he said. "Once Harley's back at work, she'll be glad we didn't get the law involved unnecessarily. You can talk to Artie in his trailer, but you'll have to wait until shooting's over."

He took me to the star's trailer and left me alone. To pass the time, I searched the place for anything to tell me a little about him. He was a smoker, a Laker fan until the Clippers were better, and instead of reading Shakespeare and Arthur Miller like Harley, he had a love for *American Pie* films. There was a snippet from a newspaper cut out and pasted on his mirror. It was a sponsored article on his latest film. The headline: *Turn off your brain and enjoy Artie Bowers' new flick.*

The trailer door opened and in came a creature that was half man half wolf. Wild tangled chest hair busted out of its torn shirt, fanged teeth protruded from its dirty bearded mouth, and piercing yellow eyes with vertical slits leapt out of their sockets with psychotic light.

"We got 10 minutes," the wolfman said. "Let's make this quick."

He sat in front of the mirror and leaned back with his phone in hand. He scrolled through Instagram with the tips of his clawed fingers.

"Artie Bowers," I said. "Almost didn't recognize you."

"Our makeup artists do their jobs."

"This for a Halloween episode or something?"

"Nah, this is the season 22 premiere. Chucky gets bit by a radioactive dog and turns into... well, this. The only way to turn him back is for Harley to find a radioactive cat. The cat genes cancel out the dog ones because cats are the opposite of dogs."

We watched each other for a moment.

"You didn't laugh," he said.

"I wasn't sure if you were joking. Honestly, that sounds more like a *Twilight Zone* episode. And not a good one."

"Well it's a moot point considering we don't have a show until Harley gets her shit together."

He rocked restlessly on his chair. His claws dug into the cushioned armrests.

"What do you want with me anyway?" he asked. "You really think if I knew where Harley was we would've hired a PI?"

"Stand too close to a map, you won't see Antarctica."

“What?”

“I want to get inside Harley’s head. That means taking a step back to look at her life as a whole. What’s your relationship with her like?”

“Good,” he said. “Better than good. We’re goddamn soulmates.”

“Harley’s mother said you fought all the time. Said you got violent with her.”

“That’s bullshit. I never hit her.”

“You grabbed her so hard you left bruises, Artie.”

“Those were just accidents.”

“Accidents happen once to the naïve, and twice to the stupid. Any more than that and you’re looking at a serious character flaw. You manhandle Harley because you think you own her. Any time she strays from the path you laid out in your own mind, you think you can grab her leash and force her back onto it.”

He got up with enough force that the chair he sat on hit the back wall. Nose flared and fangs bared, he got up right into my face. The makeup and prosthetics gave him a plastic chemical smell.

“You think I did something to her!?” he said, poking me hard in the chest. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? You think I killed her and chopped her up into little pieces, don’t you!?”

The man had nitroglycerine in his veins. The slightest touch would make him go boom. He was a 5 foot 9 man in the prime of his life hoisting around 150-pounds of bodyweight sculpted by Hollywood fitness trainers. Though I was the larger man standing at 6 feet, my 200 pounds of weight was sculpted by Chinese takeout and years of binge drinking.

But I wasn’t worried. No one who’s been rich and famous for as long as him could fight someone as broke as me. No, no, I didn’t survive growing up in Compton, serving on the LAPD, and a marriage to my ex-wife to let a pampered jackass like Artie Bowers intimidate me.

“You’ve got a temper,” I said.

“You’ve got a big mouth.”

“Did Harley have a ‘big mouth’ too?”

He was going to punch me. He did more than telegraph it—he bought a full-page ad in the LA Times to declare it. I could see it in his face before I saw it in his body. When I saw it in his body—him taking a half-step back, his hips turning, arm raising—I had all the time in the world to decide how to dodge.

He threw an erratic underhand right. I evaded with a minor head weave, the prosthetic fur on his hand tickling my cheek as his fist whizzed by. He connected with the

glass window behind me, spinning a spider web of cracks across it. The way a frolicking child's smile turns to tears with a tumble to the pavement, Artie's enraged red face crumpled into a wincing wimpy one as he withdrew his hand and saw the blood on his knuckles.

"Now look what you did," I said.

"It frickin' hurts, man!"

The soft spots between his knuckles had tiny pieces of glass in them. I set the chair back up and sat him down. Finding a first aid kit in one of the cupboards, I used a pair of tweezers inside to pluck the glass out piece by piece.

"We gonna talk like adults now?" I asked.

"You're a real piece of shit."

I ripped out a piece of glass in a less than gentle manner. He squealed and bit down on his other fist.

"I think it's broken," he whimpered.

"It's not," I said. "How much more reasonable can I be here? I'm trying to find your girlfriend while you're over here playing dress-up. Be straight with me."

He was biting down hard enough to leave fang marks on his hand. If he kept that up, his left hand would end up as bad as his right.

"I didn't kill her," he said.

"Never said you did. The jury's still out, you just need to give them something to deliberate on. You can start by telling me what your last fight was about."

He rested his chin on his left. I kept digging at the glass, though he was so deep in thought he was almost numb to it.

"It was over our wedding," he said.

"The live band or DJ dilemma?"

"Whether we should have one or not. Last night we got into a little screaming match. She called me some words, and I... well, I threw a lamp at her. It didn't hit her, it just kinda flew past her head, but after that, she hopped in her Tesla and left."

He cried in pain as I drained a bottle of peroxide on his hand.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "You have no right to treat me this way. No right!"

"You deserve worse, Artie."

"You really think I did something to her. Well think about this: we've known each other since we were kids, and she's the *only* woman I've ever been with. If something

happened to her, I’d throw myself into the ocean. News flash, dipshit: she’s got a problem! She went to that bar in Mar Vista last night and she’s probably pub-crawling across the city. Stop wasting your time with me and maybe you can cut her off at El Segundo.”

“She’s sober,” I said. “If you love her—and I mean *her*, not just who you think she is—you’d know that.”

“Sober? Yeah right. I’ve been seeing injection marks on her arms for weeks now. She tried to hide them, but she can’t keep anything from me.”

Injection marks? But she displayed the sobriety coins on her nightstand like they were something she was proud of. They were the first things she saw every morning, and the last things she saw at night. Daily reminders of both her progress and what she could lose every time she heard Jim Beam or the China White calling.

“Classic character assassination,” I said. “You’re just an abuser covering your ass. Fights like the one you had last night happen all the time, and I’d bet the lamp throwing wouldn’t even make the highlight reel. That’s why you’re always sending poetry to apologize.”

He looked at me perplexed. “What are you talking about?”

“The flowers and wine you’ve been sending her.”

“Why would I send her wine? She’s an alcoholic.”

Just then, Seth Davidov busted through the door with several security guards trailing behind him. His eyes widened at the sight of Artie’s bloody hand, and I could almost hear the click clacking of his brain doing a cost analysis on the impact of the injury on production.

“Medic! Get me a medic!” he exclaimed before lasering on me. “*Just wanna talk*, eh? What the hell did you do to him?”

The security guards were already moving in, so I didn’t bother to explain. Artie Bowers, in no rush to tell his boss he had taken a swing at me, sat in silence as the guards took me by the arms and forced me out the trailer. They escorted me off the studio lot, and threatened to call the police if I came back.

If Artie didn’t write the poetry, then it would seem Harley had a secret admirer. One who bore an unhealthy love for her, who idealized her beyond the realms of the possible, who had a heroin-like addiction to her. As a conventionally attractive celebrity, Harley was sure to have many sad, lonely men fawning over her. At least a couple had to be crazy enough to try to kidnap her. Perhaps the stalker realized his poetry wouldn’t work, and decided the best way to a woman’s heart was through Stockholm Syndrome.

LA was full of creatures with such ideas sludging through their reptile brains. But I had a creeping suspicion that this particular one was in Harley's life somehow. After all, the stalker knew her home address, and despite weeks of harassment, Harley never reported it.

With Davidov's document in hand, I returned to the coffeeshop, treated myself to another caramel macchiato, and sat down in a corner booth. The doc contained all the names of people working on the production organized alphabetically. My finger traced through the crew members with surnames starting with *B*. Amongst them, there were only 5 whose first names started with *A*: Alexis Bennett, Annabelle Baker, Avon Broussard, Andy Bucher, and Abigail Beck. Because the poetry's handwriting seemed to be drawn with a man's hand, I eliminated the women as possibilities, leaving only Avon and Andy.

My finger found the contact information of a production manager on set. I called to ask about Avon and Andy.

"I'll get you Avon," the PM said. "Just gimme a minute."

"What about Andy?" I asked.

"Andy's not in today. He's home sick."

A few minutes later, a man with a deep voice answered.

"Who dis?" he said.

"I'm a PI, Avon. But right now I'm more like an astronomer 'cuz I'm tryna find your star."

"Shiiet man, better hurry. I got a vacay coming up, and if Harley pushes production back too far, my wife's gonna be in Miami by herself."

"Believe me, brother: Miami is the last place you want your wife alone. See if you can help me out here: you know a guy named Andy Bucher?"

"Yeah, he does hair and makeup. Kinda a weirdo."

"Hair and makeup, eh?"

I considered my next words. It was the 21st century and I wanted to ask my next question in an inclusive 21st century way.

"This guy," I started. "Does he... like women?"

Avon Broussard laughed. "*Women*, I'm not too sure about. But he's head over heels for one..."

I thanked him and gave Adeline a call. She told me that her trip to the bar in Mar Vista came up empty. The bartender said Harley came alone, ordered a Shirley Temple, and left in her yellow Tesla. As I explained that the obsessive love letters were sent by a stalker named

Andy Bucher, not Artie Bowers, my phone buzzed with a response from my LAPD contact. She had finally gotten back to me about that yellow Tesla.

Apparently, a car matching that description had been found abandoned not far from the coast over by Seal Beach. The license plate had been removed, the door left open, the engine still running.

Blood was splattered on the steering wheel and driver’s seat.

Andy Bucher had been working in the film and TV industry for almost 3 decades. He spent most of that on *Happy Harley*. Even as the writers, showrunners, directors, and crew swapped in and out to pursue other ventures, Bucher was the one constant. Along with Harley and Artie, he was the longest tenured member of the team.

His posts on Instagram were scarce and he had few followers. He had a kind enough face despite his many pimple scars and one too many chins. His obesity didn’t make him appear slobbish or lazy, but soft and huggable like a children’s mascot. Between his thin-rimmed circular glasses and brown fringy hair, he looked kinda like if Harry Potter had packed on some extra pounds and went to community college instead of Hogwarts.

By the time my Uber arrived at his apartment complex, the sun had begun its slow descent into the horizon, turning the sky orange and giving the clouds an almost purple hue. Adeline was waiting on the hood of her silver Corvette, her freckled arms crossed impatiently. We headed up the stairs to Bucher’s unit.

“You have your gun?” Adeline asked.

“Course not,” I said. “I’m not a cop anymore.”

“We’re dealing with a possible kidnapper. Maybe a murderer.”

“When I left the office this morning, I thought I’d be peeling a celeb off a barstool, not tracking down Buffalo Bill.”

After knocking several times, we conceded that Bucher wasn’t home. Adeline didn’t seem to mind the fact. She reached into her purse and removed two metal chopstick-like lockpicking devices as banally as one reaches for their housekeys.

“Stop looking around so much,” she said, jamming the objects into the keyhole and jimmying them around.

A minute later, she had the door open and waltzed in as if invited. I waited a few minutes before following her in. Dad always taught me to be a leader, not a follower—unless you’re committing a crime, in which case, legally speaking, it’s better to be the accessory than the mastermind.

A psychopath’s home is normally either an unhygienic mess or obsessively clean. Andy Bucher didn’t have the apartment of a psychopath. It was neither suspiciously sloppy nor dubiously dust-free. It was small with carpet and wallpaper a few decades out of time, but otherwise, a regular apartment a regular man would live his regular life in.

Given the apartment’s size, I had a clear view of the living room and kitchen from the front door. Sitting on the kitchen countertop was an open laptop. On the screen sat the confirmation email for a plane ticket heading to the Philippines. The ticket was purchased early in the morning and the plane was to depart LAX in a few hours. His passport sat on the living room coffee table.

Not going anywhere without this, I thought. But he’ll be back for it, and soon if he wants to make his flight. We gotta boogey.

Adeline was on her knees at the far side of the apartment picking the lock to Bucher’s bedroom.

“Eli,” she said. “You’re a sad middle-aged man who lives alone in a shitty apartment. Tell me: do you lock your bedroom door?”

The bedroom door was made of softening wood whose mahogany paint had faded over the years. The doorknob was a shiny gold that reflected Addy’s face.

“He installed that himself,” I said. “It wasn’t there when he moved in.”

There was something foul behind that door. A minor scent that tickled my nose in an unpleasant way seeped through; there was no light whatsoever on the other side, as if the bedroom windows had been painted black; just touching the door made my skin numb with goosebumps.

Adeline sensed this too. She finished with the lock, got up, and gestured for me to lead the way.

I took a deep breath and did what I always did when faced with an unknown: picture the worst possible thing. In this case it was Andy Bucher naked, his flabby body jiggling like Jell-O as he humped Harley’s bloody, lifeless corpse.

Awful, right? But that was the point. Nothing on the other side of that door could be worse than that, so no matter how bad it was, it couldn’t shake me.

I opened the door and flicked on the lights. What I saw shocked and disgusted me in ways that growing up in Compton, serving on the LAPD, and a marriage to my ex-wife couldn’t prepare me for. Brutality, depravity, and cruelty I was prepared for. What was in that room was something different. Something that disarticulated the neurons in my brain that held on to notions of love and hate, outwards and inwards.

The walls were strewn with *Happy Harley* posters—so much so, the wallpaper color didn’t seem mahogany like the rest of the apartment but more like the peachy tone of

Harley’s skin. The DVD rack next to the TV had all 21 seasons of the show on boxset. On the bed was a body pillow displaying a cartoon depiction of Harley in lingerie, which Bucher probably got on the dark web. Across a long dresser were a series of exhibits like something you’d see at a science fair. Except they weren’t rock collections and cocooned butterflies, they were mementos gathered from decades working on the show. Unlike Harley who took home props and pieces of the program, Bucher took home, quite literally, pieces—PIECES—of Harley. In a vile were 5 or 6 baby teeth, a Ziploc containing enough scraps of golden blond hair to make a wig, a jar was filled with fingernail clippings, and sealed in an airtight sandwich bag was a child-sized tampon covered in long dried blood.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathed.

Adeline entered the room behind me with her hand clasped on her mouth. We were careful not to touch anything. We didn’t want to leave any part of ourselves in the room, and certainly didn’t want to take any part of it out with us. She snapped photos with her phone.

“They’ve had a pedo on set for 20 years,” she said. “Every day the creep did her hair, did her makeup, spent hours alone with her...”

“I don’t think it’s pedophilia,” I said. “There’s more merch of her as a grown-up than as a kid. What that tells me is that his obsession with her hasn’t wavered over the years but multiplied.” I continued to gander around the room, and as I did, I became surer of my conclusion. “This room is more like a shrine to Harley. Bucher’s love for her is not that of a man towards a woman, but of a man to a deity.”

“Multiplied, you say? If stealing baby teeth and tampons were where he started, what’s he graduated to?”

A waft of blood caught my nose. It smelt too fresh to have been coming from the tampon. I followed my nose to the neatly made bed. Getting down on my knees, I looked underneath.

There was a license plate and a pair of scissors.

Both stained with blood.

Looking over my shoulder, Adeline saw them too. Without uttering a word, we left the bedroom and the apartment exactly as we found it. We held our breaths until we were inside Adeline’s corvette.

“I need a shower,” she said. “Should we call the cops?”

“If they found out we broke in, all this evidence would get thrown out. Here’s what we’re gonna do: when he comes back, we’re gonna make a citizen’s arrest, claiming he robbed us or something. When the cops arrive, they’ll search his apartment and find the shrine and the knife. They’ll have the culprit before they even know Harley’s missing.”

We were quiet for a while.

"Think she's dead?" Adeline asked.

"The amount of blood on that knife and in that car... she'd have to be."

"If he loved her so much, why would he kill her?"

"Maybe he became disillusioned. Maybe he realized his goddess was just a girl with a good publicist. Maybe he'd rather her dead than let her twist the image he'd built up in his mind."

I checked my phone. There were 8 missed calls from Oriana.

"Eli!" she answered when I called her. "About time you picked up!"

She sounded out of breath. Behind her voice was the sound of an engine running.

"Are you driving?" I asked. "I told you to watch the house."

"I was! Until this guy—a big fat guy with glasses—showed up in a white Prius. He just waltzed into Harley's house like it wasn't no thing."

"Tell me you're driving *away* from the man."

"No, no, I'm heading up the driveway to, you know, observe and report."

"Why!?"

"I don't know! It's what you'd do in the situation!"

"I'm not a good role model, Ori! Jesus Christ, he'd have to be blind and deaf not to catch you coming up!"

She went quiet, and I heard the car come to a gentle stop.

"Who is he anyway?" she asked.

"His name's Andy Bucher, and he may look like the Kool-Aid Man, but he's dangerous."

"The Kool-Aid Man seems pretty dangerous."

"Just stay on the line and get out of there. I'm on my way."

Adeline fired up her Corvette and started towards Beverly Hills with urgency. She was a freckled-faced Danica Patrick, bobbing and weaving through traffic. She sailed through stop signs, rocketed through red lights, and yielded to nothing as she climbed 50 miles above the speed limit.

"Eli!" Ori cried through my phone. "It's the gate! The gate won't open!"

"Relax, kid, just use the fob Mrs. H gave us."

"The fob got me in but it's not getting me out! I don't know what I—"

Glass shattered. She screamed. The line went dead.

The car was still in motion when I leapt out and hoofed it to the gate. Climbing the thing was easy. Landing on the other side, however, put pain in my knees and more rage in my heart.

My convertible was on the other side. Still set in drive, its nose pressed on the gate, scratching and denting the bumper. The window on the driver's side had been shattered, the seat belt cut with a knife, and one of Oriana's sneakers lay a little ways up the driveway.

As I sprinted up the hill, the world seemed ethereal, made of gas and liquid rather than solid matter. The green lawn, the pissing statues, the things that caught my eye before were now blurs in my periphery. I cleared the front steps in two bounds, and lowering my shoulder, broke through the front door.

My fists clenched, head on a swivel, I surveyed Harley's museum-like main floor. Her *Happy Harley* mementos stood in pedestals in rows all along the hallway. The prom dress, the bicycle, the Jackie Robinson baseball... but one exhibit was empty.

At the end of the hallway, Oriana lay on the floor, her wrists bound behind her back with duct tape. Her eyes were wide looking at me, her mouth taped shut. Looming over her was a fat man with rimless circular glasses. In his hand was the gun Happy Harley had talked the school shooter out of using in season 12 episode 13.

"Don't come closer!" Andy Bucher cried. His voice was a higher pitch than I would've imagined for a man his size.

He was sweating buckets, his hand shaking. He was terrified, and that terrified *me*. A man full of fear was a man devoid of reason and empathy.

He jammed the gun into Oriana's neck just under her jaw. Although the gun was a prop, firing a blank at close proximity to such a vital area could spell death for my beloved assistant.

There were about 10 feet separating me from him. If I rushed him, he'd pull the trigger. If I had my .45 with me, we could've had a Mexican standoff. Without it, I had to be diplomatic. Raising my hands and a smile, I tried to sweet talk the psychopath.

"Easy now, Andy. You don't wanna hurt poor Ori here."

"I don't want to hurt anyone," he said.

"You're a lover, not a fighter. Why don't we put the gun down?"

He looked like he wanted to. He really did. But his finger inched towards the trigger.

"You'll go to the cops," he said.

"The who? Never heard of 'em."

“This wasn’t supposed to happen. We were supposed to be together... We were supposed to be happy...”

His voice had the signs of an oncoming cry. The man was unstable. The fact that he hadn’t made any hostage demands was proof alone that all this preamble was just a slow march towards the trigger.

“She told me she loved me,” he anguished. “She told me she wanted to be with me. I thought I was finally starting to get through to her, then she did what she did and— and— I’m so goddamn stupid!”

He struck his forehead with the butt of the gun. “Stupid!” he cried, and struck himself again. “Stupid! How could I think she’d ever waste time with someone like me!?” He struck himself again and again until a thin line of blood trickled down his face.

Ori’s wide eyes watched him with horrified confusion.

“Is that why you killed her?” I asked as he continued to beat on himself. “She led you on and broke your heart?”

The gun froze an inch from his face. He looked me in the eyes, now chillingly calm.

“I didn’t kill her,” he said. “I... I set her free.”

He said it with such deluded confidence that he almost pulled me into his fantasy world. Free her? Free her from her mortal body whose addiction tainted her pure soul? Or perhaps free her to live on in Bucher’s mind palace un-besmirched by her real-life actions.

Oriana made a muffled noise. She squirmed incessantly, her eyes screaming, “He’s crazy, Eli! DO SOMETHING.”

My talents were in riling people up, not calming them down. There was no getting inside his head, so I had to go upside it.

Slowly, I reached into my back pocket and removed my lighter. Like passing a note in class, I kept my hand behind my back as I ignited the lighter on the exhibit next to me: Harley’s prom dress from season 8 episode 22. Whatever material they made it out of took kindly to flame. Soon it was smoking and simmering, and Andy Bucher noticed.

“No!” he cried.

He released Oriana, and stumbled over her dashing towards the burning dress. Spinning on my heel, I pivoted to the Jackie Robinson baseball exhibit. With the ball in hand, I hurled it with form and force Jackie would be proud of. The ball speared Bucher right between the eyes, splitting his glasses in two. The house shook as he hit the floor, eyes rolled back, leg twitching.

I rushed over to Ori and peeled the tape off her lips. When I cut the tape binding her wrists, she threw her arms around me.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "Your car's messed up."

"Screw the car," I said. "As long as you're okay."

"He had his own fob, Eli. He used it to shut down the gate from the terminal. I don't know where he got it. I—"

"*Shhh*, take a deep breath," I said, half patting her on the back to soothe her, half trying to ease her off me. There was an active fire that demanded our attention.

We ran to the kitchen, filled a pot with water, ran back, and put out the fire before it consumed the rest of the house. Adeline returned just in time to see us do it.

"Cops are on their way," she said. "I purpose we stick around to explain things."

"Good idea," I said.

"Another case closed, eh Eli?"

"What do you mean, Ms. Jane?" Oriana asked. "We still haven't found Harley yet."

Adeline and I exchanged looks. Without a word, we broke into a game of rock-paper-scissors. Predictable as always, Addy went with paper and I sliced right through it. She swore under her breath, exhaled, and ushered Ori to a couch in the next room. Once they were seated, Adeline broke the news.

Oriana buried her face into her hands and sobbed. The fact that she had never met her idol was irrelevant. When you've spent so much time with someone, shared so many laughs with them, even through a TV screen, losing them felt like losing any loved one. Adeline rubbed her back to console her.

I should've been there to comfort her too, but something kept gnawing at me.

In my pocket was Harley's sobriety bronze chip. In my ears were Artie Bowers' words about the injection marks on Harley's arms. In my eyes were Harley's certificate from that performing arts school and the classic theatre texts on her bookshelf. In my thoughts were Bowers' abuse, Davidov's doting, Mrs. Harbor's high expectations...

And everything made sense.

I returned to the girls. Like timing the perfect entrance into a game of Double Dutch, I waited for the right moment in-between Ori's sobs to jump in.

"Addy," I said. "Could you stay back and explain this to the cops? Oriana's pretty shaken. I should take her home."

Adeline raised an eyebrow. "You've never been one to dote."

"Good assistants are worth doting over. C'mon, Ori."

Her eyes were still red, her nose still running as we left Harley’s mansion. The glass on the floor of my car cracked when I got into the driver’s seat. With Ori beside me, I set a course for Union Station.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“How many seasons did Harley just sign on for?” I asked.

“10. Why do you ask?”

I smiled and said nothing.

“Why are you smiling, Eli?”

“You’ll see.”

Oriana scrambled for something to hold onto as I ripped into the parking lot. We got out the vehicle already in full sprint, heading towards the train platforms. A helpful electronic sign let us know where we could find trains bound for New York.

By some cosmic chance, we arrived at the platform just as the train did. We drew eyes as we ran along the cars, watching travellers lug their baggage through those narrow doors, searching for that face with the dimpled smile that America loved.

Oriana tugged on the scruff of my collar to get my attention. She pointed at a girl with a baseball cap tucked low on her brow, casting her eyes in shadow. She wore a baggy jean jacket and her brown hair was short and messy. Despite her low profile, she stood out to some degree. Unlike the other passengers that carried their whole lives in their luggage, she had packed light with just a backpack and duffel bag. It required a closer look to understand why Ori had singled her out.

She was halfway through the door when I grabbed her by the forearm. She turned to see Ori and I, and her eyes filled with dread. She didn’t scream or make a fuss of any kind at the strange man who had just grabbed her.

“Who are you?” she asked, face calm but eyes wild.

Now that I was closer, it became clear that I indeed knew this woman—or at least some version of her. A woman with pinkish peachy skin, with eyes as blue as blue gets, with teeth 10/10 dentists would recommend, who until today had long golden blonde hair.

“Let me go!” she cried in a stage whisper as not to draw attention.

I half raised her arm, and as her sleeve fell to gravity, I saw the injection marks on her forearm. Except they were more like *ejection* marks because instead of filling her veins with heroin, she had deprived them of blood little by little until she had enough to frame poor, lovestruck Andy Bucher for her murder.

Her abandoned car, the bloody scissors she planted in Andy's room, the plane ticket she convinced him to buy with false promises of a new life together... they were all to fake her death. When Andy said he was setting her free, he thought he was helping her escape the 10-year contract her mother pressured her into signing. The contract that would keep her chained to the likes of Davidov and Bowers. The contract that would piss away what remained of her youth as she performed increasingly absurd plotlines manufactured by a program that even a decade ago had overstayed its welcome.

"Davidov sent you, didn't he?" Her voice was cracking, eyes watering.

The mask was off. Years of fame had transformed the rosy-cheeked child the public adored into this manipulative, self-centered woman. Although Davidov was sure to sweep all this under the rug to spare her the backlash and legal trouble, my part in the matter was done. All was revealed. The only thing left to do was bring her in and collect payment for a job well done.

But for some reason, I felt my grip loosening.

"I don't work for Davidov," I heard myself say and felt myself digging around in my pocket. "It's just that you dropped this."

I placed the bronze coin in the palm of her hand and closed the fingers around it. Tight, so she would never leave it behind again.

Her lips were parted, her blue eyes question marks. Maybe she was considering saying thank you, but was still waiting for me say what strings were attached.

"Keep waiting and the train'll leave without you," Oriana said smiling.

"Um, yeah," the woman said, and wiped her nose.

"Happy trails, my friend."

The train doors closed with her on the other side. The train eased out of the station, soon becoming a bullet aimed at the horizon. Still in a disbelieving dream-like daze, the woman who used to be Harley peered out the window and flashed a smile that could catch lightning. The smile that made everyone in the world happy except the one wearing it.

Oriana and I didn't say anything for a while. We watched the train until it was gone from view and listened until its rumbling engine had faded away.

"How'd you know she'd be here?" she finally asked.

"Think about it," I said. "She clearly had love for high theatre. What better place to go than Broadway?"

"And how'd you know she'd take the train?"

"Easier to get through unnoticed than on a plane. Plus, she sent Bucher to LAX, so lord knows she wanted to be as far from him as possible."

"Speaking of him, we're not going to let him go down for murder, are we?"

"And waste taxpayer dollars? The creep's not worth it."

On our way out of Union Station, I lit myself a cigarette. Even though I had made no money and damaged my car, making this about as unproductive a Monday could be, I felt I deserved it. Oriana didn't nag me about it. She felt I deserved it too.

A year and change later, I received a letter with no return address. Normally, when I got mail like that, they were boring ol' death threats. Inside this particular letter, however, were two VIP tickets to a production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on Broadway starring a rising newcomer to the theatre circuit in the lead role. Along with it was a note, short and sweet.

To my friends who gave me such a fond farewell, I want to say thank you. If you're ever lost on the east coast, there's someone who'll be happy to find you.

-Henrietta Hedderman