

New Leaf

I couldn't clear a flight of steps without getting winded; I got dizzy when I stood up too fast; I couldn't make it to 10:00pm without a midday nap; my joints hurt, and not even in a way that allowed me to predict the weather.

None of this should've been happening to a man in his late 30s. In hopes that I survived to see my early 40s, my New Year's resolution was to live healthier. This consisted of quitting smoking and drinking, eating less carbs and sugar, and visiting the gym 4 times a week. By February, my New Year's resolutions were usually yesterday's lunch. But this year, it was March and I had yet to forsake them.

The biggest driving force for change was my fitness trainer, Priscilla Duran. She was in her early 30s with dark Cuban skin and long black hair always braided down her back like an Amazon warrior. Her exercise bra showcased her modest yet perky breasts, her pants were formfitting, and little by little, workout by workout, I was trying to weasel my way into them.

And all the flirting had payed off. One day after a particularly hard workout, she asked me out to lunch. We met in a local sandwich shop by Macarthur Park not far from the gym. I ordered a cilantro-avocado tuna sandwich because it was the healthiest-sounding thing on the menu. I had her right where I wanted her, laughing and smiling at my jokes, ooo-ing and awe-ing at my slightly embellished stories from the PI business. The one about the senator, his mistress, his Labrador, and his Labrador's mistress had her almost out of her chair with laughter. I was about ready to ask her out officially when I bit into the cilantro-avocado tuna sandwich.

A soapy taste filled my mouth and I was compelled to spit it into a napkin regardless of how unattractive that was.

"Sorry," I said. "Somebody must've pumped hand soap into it."

I began hailing a staff member, but Priscilla stopped me.

"There's cilantro in that," she said. "Some people are genetically predisposed to it having a soapy taste. My husband's the same way."

Husband!?

I had no idea she was married. Though I supposed every time I saw her she was in workout attire, and thus wouldn't have her ring on.

"Look at the time," I said, getting up. "Gotta go, coach. See ya Thursday."

She caught my arm before I rocketed out of there. Her hands were soft and always smelt freshly-lotioned, even after a long workout.

"Wait," she said. "Most of those stories you told me were about someone having an affair. Would you, um, consider yourself an expert in that department?"

I sat down so fast all the napkins billowed off the table. My hand held hers by the fingers and I gazed meaningfully into her beautiful brown eyes. My voice dropped an octave as I said, "Oh, I'm an expert all right."

"Great!" Removing her hand from mine, she reached into her purse and pulled out a pen. Using a napkin, she was ready to take notes. "From your professional experience, what are the telltale signs of an affair?"

My heart sunk. If I was smarter, or at least if she was less attractive, I would've walked away then.

"It varies," I said. "Generally speaking, they become more critical, more argumentative, more defensive. Sex goes sour, communication gets crappy, relationship gets rocky. Why do you ask?"

"It's my husband," she said. "I think he's cheating on me."

"What makes you think that?"

She rubbed her arm. "Well, it's just that... well, over the last few weeks he's just been so..." She moved her hands in circular motions, searching for the words. "So... Renewed!" Now that she was over the hump, she seemed to gain momentum in expressing her feelings. "Like all the damn time he just walks around with a smile on his face! He's always telling me about his day and asking me about mine even when I know he doesn't care! And he tells me he loves me like 4 or 5 times a day. And the sex! Dear God, the sex has never been better! Every night it's just BOOM, BOOM, POW!"

The other customers looked at us. Her cheeks stung red.

"Sorry, got a little carried away there," she said.

"You realize all that's the exact opposite of what I just described, right?"

"I know, I know, I just can't shake the feeling that something in his life is making him happy, and that thing is not me."

I thought about it, and the more I thought about it, the more my heart raised once more. If her husband was cheating, there was a good chance she'd retaliate. Perhaps with a certain someone sitting across from her. Like a benchwarmer waiting for their big shot, I had to stay in game shape.

"Hmm," I pondered. "You did mention the sex was better. Has he been trying new things in bed recently?"

She bit her lip as she drifted temporarily out of our conversation and into what must have been a spicy memory.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I said. “That one actually *is* a common marker of infidelity. It could be someone’s introducing him to new moves.”

“I knew it,” she said. “Eli, I’d like to hire you.”

Never before had I gone into a case with such vigor. My work had destroyed many marriages, torn countless families apart, but never before did I have such a vested interest in it.

Priscilla’s husband for the last 7 years was Alonzo Duran. Before they married, Alonzo was an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, working various landscaping and contracting jobs. Trying to get even basic knowledge about the guy was a challenge. He wasn’t on social media, he wasn’t close to anyone in his family, and didn’t have any friends besides the man who poured his drinks at the bar.

“He’s a sourpuss,” the old lady who lived across the street from him had said. “My dog once went on his lawn to do its business, and I was gonna clean up after it—I had a bag and everything—but then he comes out cussing me out for no reason at all!”

“He’s a pain in the ass,” a former co-worker had said. “Dude’s always slacking off, got this bitter look on his face all the time, and he never came along when we all went out drinking.”

“He’s my best customer,” had said the owner of the bar he frequented. “But honestly... he’s an asshole.”

The only one with anything remotely nice to say was Priscilla.

“He’s a little rough around the edges,” she said. “Stoic, quiet, rigid most of the time, high-strung. He just has his own way.”

My first glimpses of Alonzo bucked all my expectations. His black hair was short, his legs stubby, arms beefy with muscle made not in a gym but from hard living. His face wasn’t the perpetual lemon his neighbors described—he walked around with a pep in his step and a smiling face. Whether he was painting a fence or mowing a lawn, he wore headphones as he worked, always bopping his head and swaying his hips to the music.

I requested Priscilla send me his bank account activity for the last few years. Sifting through pages of activity, nothing jumped out at me about his spending habits. There were no large cash withdrawals nor any online purchases that may have been a gift for a secret lover. The only thing that caught my interest were bus tickets to Tijuana he purchased about twice year. He had just returned from a trip little over a month ago.

“I thought he didn’t have family in Mexico,” I said.

“He has a friend he visits once a year,” Priscilla explained. “Because he has his green card now, he can make the trip without fear of getting caught.”

"He ever bring you along?"

"No."

"You ever meet this friend?"

"Never even seen a photo, come to think."

"This friend sounds more like a lady friend."

"I don't think that's it. He's been going on these trips for years now and he only seemed to change recently."

I put the theory in my back pocket.

Over the next week, I spent hours observing Alonzo in hopes of catching him with a woman. For 7 straight days, there was never a minute that I didn't know where Alonzo and his penis were. When he was clocking out after a long day, I was there. When he stood in line at the DMV to replace his driver's license, I was there. When he stepped into the backyard to smoke a cigarette after Priscilla was asleep, I was there.

Every night I would sit in my car outside their house until their bedroom light flicked off, and before I left, just to be safe, I'd tuck a single Skittle beneath his car's back tire. Every morning I'd return to the Duran house and find the car where it was the night before, the Skittle uncrushed.

"I've never seen anything like that," the old lady had said when I asked about Alonzo's relations with other women. "And I'm always keeping an eye out for Priscilla's sake. She's such a sweet woman."

"Never mentioned a broad to us," the co-worker had said when I asked a similar question. "Though he never talked much in general."

"Women tended to avoid him," the bar owner had said. "Even if he wanted to cheat on that wife of his, he had no game whatsoever."

If I was a consummate professional, I would've given up then. I would've told Priscilla that her husband wasn't cheating and that they could go back to their happy lives together. But I was thinking with the wrong organs on this case, and decided to try one last gambit. A desperate trick play only PIs of ill repute would attempt.

Many of the women who work at the strip club next to my office came to the city with dreams of becoming actresses. For the right price, they'd lend me their talents for a few hours.

Scarlett's hair was dyed bright red, she wore a pound of makeup, and had enormous breasts that appeared real so long as you didn't touch or look at them in natural light. The perfume she wore was overwhelming, she always had glitter falling off her, and her lips were

puffy, as if experiencing an allergic reaction to shellfish. Not exactly someone you'd take to the altar, but her generous proportions made her too hot to resist if served on a silver platter.

My plan was to pitch a drunk girl at him to see how he'd swing. She didn't actually have to sleep with him, I just needed pictures of them leaving together. If he came down with a bad case of blue balls and decided to get pushy with her, I'd swoop in to get her out of harm's way.

As a woman trying to make LA rent while paying for acting classes, she was always in need of extra cash. Considering that getting drunk and going home with some loser was something she did *every* night (I would know, sometimes that loser was me), it was a good gig for Scarlett.

Alonzo and his coworkers went out to a sports bar and grill on Friday night to watch a boxing match. We watched him from a booth on the other side of the restaurant as he and 3 others sat at the bar. Seeing him crack jokes and buy rounds of drinks for his companions, made me wonder if his former co-worker had been thinking of someone else when I had spoken to him.

The fight ended just after 1am, and as I sensed him getting ready to leave, I readied my scarlet weapon.

"Make it convincing," I said as she staggered towards him.

She had gone method for the role, consuming 6 shots of tequila in the last 20 minutes. Her tube top was so tight her breasts were threatening to spill over the top like foam from a sloppily poured mug, and her panties were pulled high so you could see them over her shorts.

She got his attention and the two began chatting. She twirled her hair, fluttered her eyelashes, touched his arm, bit her lip, sent every signal imaginable that she was an easy lay. The kind who evaporates from your life after one magical night of unprotected sex, leaving you with only a fond memory and a slight itch in your pants easily remedied with over-the-counter shampoos.

After 10 or so minutes of talk, the two left the bar together with their arms linked, Scarlett's head resting on his shoulder.

Gotcha, I thought, and pretending to take a selfie, snapped a photo of them. I left money for Scarlett's tequila shots and exited through the back. Circling around to the parking lot, I watched her climb into Alonzo's pickup truck. Hopping in my car, I removed my professional camera from the glove compartment and snapped more photos. Alonzo pulled out of the parking lot, and I followed at a safe distance.

Now parked out front of Scarlett's apartment, I watched Alonzo help her out the truck, and the two walked inside, her head on his shoulder the whole way.

I texted her if she was okay.

I'm fine, she texted back immediately. You can go home now.

You sure? From what I hear, he doesn't seem like he'd take rejection too well.

That won't be a problem. He's a pretty funny guy, and you know I like a sense of humor. Besides, I haven't gotten the goods in a loooooong time.

Just last week we had hooked up in the back of my car.

Time was relative, I supposed.

Usually, I tried to get a photo or at least an audio recording of the act itself to erase all doubt for my clients. But it was late, and I thought it be best to spare poor Priscilla the gory details.

I lit a victory cigarette on my way home, and thought about what restaurants I would take Priscilla to.

My assistant, Oriana Rivera, had left me a mountain of case files on my desk when I came in Saturday. I tried to take Saturdays off, but working this Duran case had led me to neglect all my other active cases.

I was typing away on my computer when Scarlett barged into my office as people were wont to do when Oriana wasn't around to gatekeep. She must've been on her way in for a shift at the strip club next door because she had her duffel bag with her.

"How's Alonzo in the sack?" I asked. "Better than me? Be honest, I can take it."

Scarlett had her lips pursed in an uncertain way.

"Um, we actually—"

"On second thought," I said, "Don't answer that. I'm going after his future ex-wife, and I don't want that at the back of my mind."

"We didn't do it, Eli."

The first time Scarlett and I ever hooked up, in the afterglow of a liberating sexual release following my messy divorce, she felt it appropriate to tell me, as I held her close, running my fingers through her hair, that she once had a threesome with a Laker and a Celtic while a Knick watched.

The look on my face when she told that story wasn't even close to the shock I experienced now. To her, sex was like friending someone on Facebook—she did it with almost everyone she knew mostly because she thought it rude not to. Pretty sure if she got one more abortion, the next would be free. Something spectacularly awful must've happened for her to choose abstinence.

I pushed my keyboard away and powered off the monitor. I looked at her for some explanation before realizing I didn't need one.

"That's okay," I said. "I got the pictures of you two leaving together and that's all my client needs. It doesn't matter that you didn't actually do anything because it shows his intent."

I pulled two hundred dollars out of my wallet, and she tucked the money in-between her breasts. I didn't know why she carried cash that way when she had a perfectly good purse. Maybe it made her feel more like a *femme fatale* that way. Or maybe the surgeon who gave her those breasts also installed a little pocket for her to keep her things.

"I don't like this," she said.

"We agreed on two hundred."

"Not that. What you're about to do to Alonzo."

"He's a cheater, Scar."

"He turned *me* down, Eli. He brought me back to my apartment, I tried to kiss him, and he pulled away. He said he just wanted to make sure I got home okay because I was really drunk and there were a lot of guys who'd take advantage of me. I insisted that I was sober enough to consent, but he said that even if that were true, he was a married man. He said he loved his wife more than anything in the world because she gave him a second chance at life. It brought a tear to my eye."

I checked my eyes for tears.

Nope, nothing.

"He probably saw through the ruse," I said.

"No, I saw it in his face. He meant it. I can't let you give his wife those photos."

I exhaled and leaned back in my chair.

"Fine," I said. "Can I at least have my money back?"

A look of puzzlement fit for a community college acting class overcame her face.

"Money? What money?"

With her duffel bag slung on her shoulder, she left my office.

I was about ready to give up when I got a call from Tracy Tower, my friend in the LAPD. I had asked her to do a background check on Alonzo Duran, and she had finally got back to me with the results.

"He's got priors," she said. "None of them went anywhere but he's been arrested quite a few times. Solicitations of prostitutes and brawling in bars. If it wasn't for that green card

his wife gave him, we'd have shipped him back to Mexico with no return address. And how does he repay her? Police have visited his address 9 times in the past 3 years on domestic abuse calls. It's a wonder how some people made it out the primordial ooze."

She forwarded me a photo of Priscilla with a puffed-up discolored eye. There was a cut on her lip and a bruise on her cheek. What disturbed me most was that she had a smile on her face. The kind that read, "boys will be boys!" as said boy becomes increasingly comfortable with inflicting harm.

When I finished my workout with Priscilla, I was prepared to go home without asking about it. But when she invited me to coffee to talk about what I had uncovered so far, I couldn't keep it in my throat any longer.

"He beats you," I said outright.

We sat at a table outside a small café. Coffee mixed with the spring breeze to brew a delectable blend for our noses. Her reaction wasn't of shock. She simply sipped her green tea and nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"It's not something that comes up in casual conversation," she said. "Hey, have you been watching your carbs? 'Make sure to get extra steps in wherever you can!' 'And oh, by the way, my husband gets drunk and slaps me around from time to time.'"

"There's nothing funny about this."

"You could find something, Eli. You always crack me up."

"I'm out of my element here."

She smiled and squeezed my hand.

"Don't worry about it. He hasn't done it in a long, long time. We're completely passed it. Now, have you found out anything about an affair?"

My years working Homicide and Vice in the LAPD had put me in the path of many abusers, but never so close to one of their victims. I channelled all my experience into my eyes and tried to analyze her. The outer damage had long healed, but the inner? My eyes couldn't see so deep.

"He's not cheating on you," I said. "I saw nothing on his account activity, tracked his whereabouts for two weeks, interviewed his associates, even tried to honeytrap him... it came up negative on all fronts."

“That’s a relief.” But she didn’t look relieved. “Maybe things have been going so well as of late that I just decided there had to be something sinister going on. People do that in times of good—they invent something to be upset about.”

“Never known too many times of good.”

She smiled. But she didn’t seem happy.

“I’ll pay for your time,” she said.

“You don’t have to.”

“I do, and I’m having you over for dinner too. How’s Wednesday?”

She wouldn’t let me go until I agreed. I returned to my office and the pile of paperwork inside, but got little done. I was dreading the small talk I’d have to make with a woman-hitting piece of shit, who were scum even amongst the lowest of lowlives. I’d have to shake his hand, laugh at his jokes, and nod along to his stories like I didn’t want to knock his teeth out.

Dressed in my finest sweater and tie, I knocked on the Duran’s house door. It worried me when my fists didn’t unclench when I was done knocking. The door opened on Alonzo and his big gap-toothed smiling face. He was dressed in a tweed blazer that he probably got from a Goodwill but wore like it was tailor made. Instead of settling for just a handshake, he threw his arms around for a firm man-hug.

“Eli Wise!” he greeted. “Prissy’s told me all about you.”

I didn’t punch him—that was a good start. My fists were still clenched though. Eating dinner would be tough without opposable thumbs.

“And who is this with you?” he asked.

“Oriana Rivera,” my college-aged assistant greeted him. “I work for this guy.”

The way a parent watches their words when their children are around, having Oriana with me would curb my urge to jerk this fine evening off the rails.

Alonzo showed us around the house. It was a quaint little one floor two-bedroom home, a working-class family—especially an immigrant one—would be proud of.

“You a Dodgers or Angels man?” he asked.

“Dodgers,” I said. “Though I’m not xenophobic when it comes to other teams.”

We chatted about sports and a little about politics. We actually shared a lot of opinions, and I didn’t like that one bit.

Pricilla was in the kitchen taking a pot out the oven.

"You're right on time," she said, and kissed me on the cheek. She introduced herself to Oriana and noticed the container in her hand.

"Just some finger food I whipped up," Ori said. "Ground beef, cilantro, cheese, and pepper wrapped in mini flatbread. I don't like showing up empty-handed."

"Just none for Eli," Priscilla said smiling. "Too many carbs."

She doled out plates of steamed chicken and salad, and we sat at the dining room table with Priscilla at the head, Alonzo and I on either side, and Oriana next to me. Priscilla recounted some of the PI stories I had told her over coffee. She butchered the one about the senator and his Labrador, but she told it with so much amusement, it made me smile. Alonzo nodded along with his eyes wide and chin rested on his knuckles. When she finished the story, he was clutching his kidneys with laughter.

"Gotta say, Eli," he said. "I wouldn't guess you were a PI. I would guess high school teacher or something."

"That a compliment?"

"Oh yes! Sorry if that wasn't clear."

Oriana slapped my hand when I reached for the wine bottle. Alonzo picked up one of Ori's mini wraps and ate it whole.

"He is kinda like a teacher," Ori said. "I wanna get into law enforcement someday, and Eli teaches me all kinds of crazy things."

Priscilla floated me a look. I knew what it meant. My eyes urged her not to do it.

"There's actually something I need to tell you, Zo," she said. She folded a napkin and looked at him seriously. "It's not a coincidence that Eli here is a PI. Two weeks ago, I hired him to investigate you."

He stopped mid-chew of the wrap. He let the mush sit in his mouth and looked at his wife with glass eyes. "Why would—" he swallowed the bolus, choked a little, cleared it with a cough, and went back to saying, "Why would you do something like that?"

"It's just that you've been so different lately," she said. "So happy, so full of life... I thought you might've been having an affair."

Alonzo's face was stone. Ori shifted uncomfortably. I pushed my plate away and clutched my fork. A breeze rustled the curtains. He rose from his seat, and with his face cast in shadows, lunged at his wife.

The fork in my hand was inches away from his jugular when he broke into a fit of laughter. Priscilla laughed too as he stroked her hair and kissed her cheek. I got in on the joke too, laughing and lowering the fork, hoping they hadn't noticed.

"That's hilarious!" he said. "Me having an affair... yeah right! Why would I waste my time with that when I could be at home with you?"

"I... I don't know."

"You said I was happy. You know who made me that way? It's the woman in front of me."

Priscilla's eyes shimmered with tears and relief. "I love you, Zo. I'm so sorry."

They embraced.

I wanted to vomit.

He turned to me. In his smile I saw no malice or resentment. But in his eyes were a slight tinge of worry.

"No hard feelings?" he asked.

"No feelings at all," I said.

"No one's in the wrong here," he said. "Especially not you—it's your job. If I can laugh at the senator and his dog, I can laugh at myself. I really didn't notice you around at all. You really are the best of the best."

He picked up the last of Ori's mini wraps and ate it. He declared that we couldn't end the evening on such an awkward note, and were now obligated to play charades. When Ori and I were done getting trounced by the Durans, they walked us to the door. Before we left though, the wine Ori had been drinking caught up with her and Priscilla showed her to the bathroom.

"There's one thing that's still bothering me," I said now that it was just Alonzo and I. "I've talked to your neighbours, coworkers, and pulled your police file, and they paint a picture of a man quite different from you. Your wife was wrong about an affair, but she's spot-on when she says you're different than you were even just a few weeks ago. I guess what I'm asking is: what exactly changed in you?"

Alonzo thought for a moment. Seemed to mull something over, letting the pros and cons ping pong in his brain. Then he gestured for me to follow him into the backyard. We stepped into the cool night, and he closed the patio door behind him.

"Keep a secret?" he asked.

"Of course," I said, unsure if I was lying.

He opened the BBQ grill, removed the cooking grate, and removed a tin can. Inside was a bag of marijuana and several rolled joints.

"I used to let anger control my life," he said. "It was because I was always anxious, always afraid. But when I started smoking weed, I don't know, it all just washed away. Now

I just look up at the night sky and count my blessings. Priscilla, my health, my freedom, this house... it's all I could ever ask for.”

Every night I watched him go to the backyard and smoke while his wife was asleep. From a distance it seemed like they were just cigarettes. Turns out, he *was* seeing a woman. Her name was Maryjane.

“Priscilla’s not a fan of weed?” I asked. “She usually speaks so highly of greens.”

“She’s very religious. So much so she doesn’t see the medical benefits. That’s why I need you to keep this between us.”

He smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. I shrugged it off, grabbed him by the collar, and slammed him against the house.

“Hey! What are you—”

“Maybe you weren’t listening before, but I mentioned your police file, Alonzo. I know about the hookers and I know what you’ve done to Priscilla.”

Surprise caught his face. Fear too.

“What are you talking about?” he cried.

I buried my knuckles into his stomach and dug around until I felt today’s dinner. As he doubled over, I shoved my phone into his face with a photo of Priscilla battered and bruised.

“Don’t play dumb,” I said. “She may forgive and forget, but I certainly won’t. You need to give me a good reason why this won’t happen again, and I’m sorry, but a newfound taste for hash isn’t gonna cut it.”

His eyes bounced between me and the photo. A new light of understanding dawned in them.

“You gotta understand,” he said. “That was the old me who did that to Prissy. The one standing before you now would never hurt her like that. I adore her. She saved my life in ways you couldn’t even imagine.”

I dashed him to the ground. With his hands and knees digging into the dirt, he clutched his stomach.

“You’d better dress your wife in bubble wrap,” I said. “If I catch so much as a paper cut on her, you and I are gonna be national news, Alonzo. They’ll make movies about what I do to you.”

I walked through the patio door, kissed Priscilla goodbye, and got into my car with Ori. Priscilla stood on her porch waving as we drove away. What she didn’t see was me circling back around to watch the house. Oriana was asleep in the passenger seat, and fatigue

burned my eyes, but I had to make sure Alonzo wasn’t going to punish his wife for spying on him.

I listened for yelling and crashing furniture, but heard only the thumping of a headboard and moans of a couple in love.

A week later, the Durans were just about off my mind. I still saw Priscilla 4 times a week for our workouts, and each time she seemed more and more content with her new husband. She was happier than I could ever hope to make her, so no longer did I lust after her. My relationship to her was now that of a client and friend, and if ever she showed up with an unexplained bruise, a violent avenger.

Yet still, as I laid in bed at night, my mind flashed back to that dinner party. There was something gnawing at me about Alonzo. Something I couldn’t quite wrap my head around.

I was always yin-ing and yang-ing in my never-ending war against alcoholism. Despite my resolution to live healthier, I was currently yang-ing. Ironically enough, I cracked my first drink to break a 3-month sober streak to cope with the loss of carbs and sugars in my life.

Of all my vices, alcohol was the most troublesome because it always came packaged with another. A soda was just a soda, a cigarette just a cigarette. Alcohol was a cola to go with rum, a cigarette paired with a drunk high, and an ill-advised text to compliment a slow drip into depravity.

Case in point, a drunk text to Scarlett had me Ubering to her place. She welcomed me with open legs and we were off to the bedroom. She disrobed, laid on the bed with feet spread apart, and with all the passion of a stewardess politely asking you to put on your seatbelt, told me to get to work.

Lying there and looking pretty was usual for her. Occasionally she’d tickle this or spank that, but mostly, making love to her was like attempting to revive a corpse with CPR. It didn’t feel good perse—maybe it was a little relieving, as is fulfilling any of the body’s wishes to purge fluids from its system. My clothes came off and I mounted her as if clocking in for another day in the gold mines, hammering away at some object I didn’t truly understand whose value to me was determined merely by the chase of it. When I kissed her, she always tasted like 8 different kinds of male cologne, which was probably a trick of my mind ever-aware and ever-anxious of the legions of men who had utilized that mouth before me, and the countless who will explore it after.

Not a short while later, my “time” arrived. Like an Olympic runner, I didn’t slow down when I saw the finish line but ran through the tape, prodding and pumping until I was hot and hollow inside. Seeing double, ears ringing, chest tightening, my body went catatonic on top of her. It took a long gasp of air and a short prayer before I gathered the strength to remove myself from the poor woman. As I laid there sweaty and sloppy, reaching for a cigarette, I checked if that weird stain on her blanket was still there.

Yup, still there.

And so was I. Still boozing, still smoking, still looking for cheap sex... So much for new year, new me.

Most women for the sake of their lover's self-esteem would at least pretend they had a swell time, even if that lover had missed their spot by a few miles.

Scarlett made no pretenses. She picked the remote from her nightstand and flicked on the TV.

"Not your best," she said, flicking through channels.

"My spirit wasn't in it," I said, and took a puff of the cig. "Alonzo's living rent-free inside my head right now."

"That was like two weeks ago. What about him's so important?"

"The dude flipped a switch and turned his whole life around. Went from douche to duke in the span of a month."

"People change all the time."

"People change... but never that easy. You know how many times I've quit drinking? Every time I do, I swear to myself it's the last time, but sooner or later I always come back. And if that wife-hitting piece of shit can fix himself and I can't, what does that make me?"

Scarlett flicked off the TV, put her arm across my stomach, and rested her cheek on my chest. Still wet with sweat, her body was cool pressed against mine.

"Sometimes you need to step back in order to move forward," she said. "When you see a tree in the summer, you don't think about all the leaves it lost in the fall."

"I'm too drunk for metaphors, Scar."

"Life is all about ebbs and flows. You can't expect your life to always move in one direction."

"Alonzo's does."

"Maybe he's got something to lose. You relapse because there's no repercussions to you doing so. There's nothing in your life you care enough about losing. If you did, you'd have more motivation to kick those habits."

She might've been on to something. But what *could* Alonzo stand to lose? His wife? His job? His...

"Go to sleep, Eli."

I tried, but couldn't quite get there. I thought about Alonzo, and for some reason those mini wraps Oriana had made.

Scarlett's makeup left a white and red splotch all over my chest, and what was left on her face was smeared into looking clownlike. The perfume she wore was practically wearing *her* there was so much. It gave me a headache. I untangled her from me, and tossing off the covers, got out of bed. A pair of briefs too large to be mine came out with me. Scarlett had a culpable look as she pretended not to notice them.

"Don't think I don't like you, Scar," I said. "But whatever this is between us, it ain't happening again."

She snort-laughed. "That's what you said last time."

And the time before that.

"You got something to drink?" I asked.

"There's lemonade in the fridge."

It was so hot that I didn't bother dressing. Walking through the messy apartment, I caught a glimpse of my manhood in a mirror, and even it seemed to shake its head disapprovingly.

"Oh shut up," I told it. "You got me into this mess."

I went to her fridge and took out the pitcher of lemonade. The greenish yellow liquid glistened in the refrigerator light as I filled a glass. It smelt sour and of chlorophyll. Smelt healthy. Something Priscilla would approve of.

I took a sip, and spat it into the sink. I filled my mouth with water, swished it around, and spat. I rinsed and repeated until the taste of soap had left my mouth.

"You find the lemonade okay?" Scarlett asked from the bedroom.

"I found it alright," I said, twisting my face the way a picky child would. "Real frickin' funny filling it with dishwater."

"Don't be stupid. It tastes fine and it's good for you. It purges the toxins from your system."

"If it tastes like that, I'd rather keep the toxins in. What's in here anyway?"

"Um, let's see. Lemon juice, cilantro, some sea salt, water obviously."

"Cilantro, huh?" I took another sip, and the taste of soap touched my tongue once more. "Holy shit," I said as a precursor to an even bolder, "Holy shit!"

"Huh, what is it?"

I had the front door half open when I remembered I wasn't wearing clothes. Returning to her bedroom, I rifled through the mess on the floor.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Tijuana," I said, praying the boxers I picked up were mine. "I need to find Alonzo."

"The guy lives in East LA. Go to sleep, Eli. You're dru—."

I shut her up with a kiss. As she pulled me back into bed, she clamped her ankles just above my buttocks, but with one sharp diagonal movement, I broke away.

There was work to do.

After a long, long, shower, I slept in my own bed. When morning came, I drove to Oriana's house. She answered the door in her pajamas still rubbing the sleep from her eyes. I told her to bring her passport and some light reading.

The drive to Tijuana took 3 hours. Every time Alonzo made a trip there to visit his "friend," he took the bus. Why take the bus instead of driving his pickup? Maybe he intended to spend most of his time inebriated and didn't want to worry about a vehicle. Or maybe he intended to conduct unsavory business and didn't want to bring anything that could connect his life in America to his actions in Mexico.

"What do you mean we have to find Alonzo Duran?" Oriana asked as we cruised down the I-5 South. "Did he move back to Mexico or something?"

"Do you like cilantro, Ori?"

"Not really. It tastes like soap to me, but other people seem to like it."

"Same here. Turns out, it's not an acquired taste but a God-given one. Some people are just genetically predisposed to having it taste like soap. I'm one of those people, you're one of those people, and Alonzo's one of those people. His wife told me that."

She watched me with a skeptical eyebrow.

"He certainly seemed to like those mini wraps I made," she said. "There were lots of cilantro in those."

"Call me crazy, but I think the man we had dinner with isn't the real Alonzo Duran."

Oriana laughed. She'd need more convincing than the cilantro thing.

"Nobody can change that drastically that fast," I said. "True change is a twisting, turning, roundabout path that takes more than a few weeks to travel."

"There's gotta be a better explanation than a telenovela plotline."

"When I mentioned the domestic abuse to him, he looked genuinely surprised. Not that I knew about it, but that it happened at all."

She still didn't seem convinced. But being the superstar assistant she was, she humored me for the time being.

We passed the boarder separating California from Baja California. Not terribly long after that, we reached the dry, dusty seemingly never-ending sprawl of buildings that comprised what some call the Gateway to Mexico. Using Alonzo's bank records, we went to the bar he had visited the last time in town. It also happened to be the last transaction on the account before a week-long break. We had to park several blocks away in a parking lot that charged way too much. Stepping out of the air-conditioned car into Mexico's dry climate, the moisture left my mouth at once, and I became in medical need of a Coca Cola. The streets of Tijuana were bustling with people who'd give me one for the right price. Outdoor vendors displayed tourist-trapping souvenirs, and the sidewalk stroll from the lot to the bar turned my white Nikes brown with dust.

The bar was more akin to a saloon, like something you'd see in a Western film. No sunlight made it through the bar's tinted windows, making it feel like day had succumbed to night the moment the door closed behind us. Shady characters sat in the booths off to the side, a few of them eyeing Oriana, who stuck to my back like a Congo line.

The bartender was a long thin man with a long thin mustache. An aging gentleman with a receding hairline and creased skin crumpled from years of living in one of the most dangerous cities in North America. He had big floppy ears that heard all rumors, and eyes ever watchful of all things in his bar and beyond. If life were a video game, he seemed like the type to send you on a side quest.

I showed him a photo of Alonzo and had Oriana ask if he recognized him. The barman made a face, and shaking his head, performed the sign of the cross. He looked off at nothing in particular and mumbled something in Spanish.

"He says he only talks to paying customers," Ori translated.

I dropped a few pesos on the counter and ordered a whiskey. Ori shot me a look, and I changed my order to a Dr Pepper instead. In my mind's eye I saw Priscilla scolding me, and changed my order once again to a glass of water with a cucumber in it.

The barman took the money, gave me a glass too dirty to drink from, and told us about the man in the photo. Oriana listened with head nods, a polite laugh here and there, and an occasional gasp.

"*Gracias*," she said when the barman was done.

On our way back to the car, she gave me the CliffsNotes.

"He said the guy in the photos had been there a couple times over the last few years. He would come there, get a few drinks in him, then head over to the *zona de tolerancia* in the red-light district. You know what I mean by '*zona de tolerancia*,' right?"

"A zone where prostitution is legal," I said. "Makes sense. He got busted on solicitation a few times, so he decided to come here to get his rocks off instead."

“The barman said a little after Alonzo’s last visit some cartel members came around looking for him just like we were. Barman told them, ‘yeah, he comes here. His name’s Alonzo.’ The cartel guys said that was a fake name. That his real name was Alberto Duran, and that he spent years as a contract killer for many cartels across Mexico. One day, Alberto wanted to quit the life, and wound up killing a bunch of people on his way out. The cartels sent people after him, but he fled to America, and went completely off the grid under a new identity.

“But then—and the barman thought this was real funny—the *pendejo* decides to come back to Mexico just to screw some whores. The barman said the *cojones* on Alberto must’ve been bigger than his brain, and didn’t feel bad at all when he told the cartel guys exactly where to find him.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“The barman didn’t know for sure. He heard some people talking about a shooting at a brothel the next day, though the victim was never identified.”

Oriana and I headed to the closest police station to the *zona de tolerancia*. We asked the clerk about a shooting in a nearby brothel little over a month ago. Oriana said she believed the victim was her uncle, and turning on the waterworks, pleaded to see the body.

He told us that unfortunately because they couldn’t identify the victim, and no one came to claim the body within 30 days, they had no choice but to cremate him as a John Doe.

“We think it was the Guerra family,” he said in pretty decent English. “Leaving bodies nameless is their style. They steal IDs, burn off fingerprints, and sometimes even pull out dead people teeth. *Lo siento, señorita*, but they must have taken his wallet. If we had found the driver’s license, the credit card, or anything we could have contacted next of kin.”

He disappeared into the station basement. After a while, he came back with a folder.

“We took pictures of the body,” he said. “*Ellos no son bonitos.*”

Not pretty in the least. It was of Alonzo Duran—the *real* Alonzo Duran—naked on a coroner table for what had to be the quickest autopsy ever. At first it looked like the man had a really bad case of chicken pox because his body was covered in quarter-sized red splotches that turned out to be holes. These holes started at the stomach and scattered upwards across his solar plexus, chest, and neck, and like twin stars atop a Christmas Tree, there were two on the forehead. You didn’t have to work Homicide in the LAPD to know this was a professional hit—the use of automatic machine guns and two executioner-style pistol shots to the head screamed it.

Gazing at the photo like some interpretive art piece, I couldn’t help but wonder if the man I met as Alonzo, whose real name was Alberto, had similar works to his name. Perhaps a far more grizzly one, of which he may repeat on a certain fake wife of his.

Or the man who threatened to take that fake wife away.

I took a photo of the photo and gave it back to the clerk. He was breaking all kinds of protocol by sharing it with us. But in a city as corrupt as Tijuana, it was a nice change of pace for someone to bend the rules out of compassion rather than greed.

"Alonzo was never close to his family," I said as we drove back to LA. "Probably because his brother was a hired killer."

"So Alonzo came here to have sex with prostitutes," Oriana recapped. "But he was mistaken for his identical brother, and killed for Alberto's crimes. Then, back in America, Alberto slides into his dead brother's life?"

"And he would've gotten away with it too if it wasn't for us meddling kids."

"And our dumb cilantro plants!"

We laughed.

"So what're we gonna do about this?" she asked. "Alonzo was an abusive jerk, but he's dead now. Alberto, objectively speaking, is far worse because he killed people..."

"But?"

"But he's so nice now. He really did change for the better, and Priscilla's much better off with him than she was with Alonzo. Think it might be better for all parties involved if we just didn't say anything?"

"Tempting," I said. "But it's out of the question. Priscilla deserves to know the truth."

After dropping Oriana off at her house, I went to the office to make a phone call.

"Meet me at my office, *Alberto*. Be here in an hour or I call Priscilla instead."

All I heard from him was a sharp inhale. I hung up before he could answer with words.

The .45 automatic I normally kept in the safe behind my desk was holstered on my hip. The tactical knife my father once used in the army, of which I used to open mail and spread butter on toast, was holstered on my right ankle. A smoking cigarette sat in the corner of my lips. I sat on my desk awaiting the cartel killer formally known as Alberto Duran.

Through the smoke and crimson neon light of the strip club next door, a red characterless shadow entered. The shadow had Alberto Duran's voice, though it was no longer the harmless, helpful man from dinner.

"Who put you up to this?" he asked.

"Nobody but you," I said. "Are you armed?"

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“I’m gonna need you to unarm yourself.”

Alberto laughed. It was light and genuine, like when he heard my story about the senator and Labrador.

“Fair enough,” he said. “I only brought the gun out of habit—I left that life behind.” He removed his belt and let it fall along with his pants. He kicked them off his ankles and ripped off his T-shirt too, so he was just in his boxers. “See? Nowhere left to hide weapons. I took it all off so you wouldn’t be uncomfortable.”

“Put ‘em back on. Your underpants make me more uncomfortable than any gun.”

He put his clothes back on. The gun remained on the ground.

“Can I close the blinds?” he asked. “The light’s hurting my eyes.”

He closed the curtains, and the neon that had stained the room crimson lessened to a degree. He was no longer a red shadow but a man who looked more at home mowing his lawn or barbecuing in his backyard than killing someone in a brothel or a bar or anywhere. He took a seat in my chair reserved for clients. His elbows rested on his knees, fingers interlocked in front of his mouth.

“I used to be a bad man,” he said. “A very bad man. Far worse than my brother or anyone I knew—and I knew a lot of bad people. But one day, I saw a couple walking through a park holding hands, tickling each other with their noses when they kissed, and as hard a cartel soldier I was, I broke into tears because I knew nobody could ever look at me like that. People were terrified of me, and I wanted—I *needed*—to change that. I confessed my sins to a priest, I gave all my blood money to the poor, and I got out of the life. I swore I’d never hurt anyone again for any reason. Not physically or emotionally, not through action or inaction.

“But change didn’t come easy to me. When I told my boss I wanted to leave, he sent people after me. I killed them one by one as they came—with guns, with knives, even with my bare hands. ‘Self-defense,’ I told myself. ‘No harm done.’ Then I got to America, and I fell on hard times. Turns out, it’s hard for an illegal to find honest work. I was homeless for awhile. My only way off the streets was to take a job collecting debts from people too poor to pay them. This required breaking homes, breaking bones, and breaking the promise I made to myself and my Higher Power. Once I had made enough money to get me going, I got an honest job driving around old people. But a lowlife like me couldn’t even do that. There was a few who refused to pay for a month’s worth of trips, and my boss told me that I either got them to pay up or he’d turn me in to immigration. So, I was right back to doing what I do best: hurting people.”

My patience was low. As much as I loved long-winded sob stories, I was dying for a drink. A hard one.

"Get to Alonzo and Priscilla," I said.

"Coming up on that now," he said. "I was caught in a vicious cycle: I wanted to be a better man, but there was something in me—deep within me—that wouldn't let me do it. Being good was hard, but being bad was easy—probably because being bad just seemed more like *me*. Then I got the news from an old buddy in the Guerra family that someone who looked exactly like me had been whacked. When I found out it was my estranged brother, I wanted to douse myself with gasoline and strike a match. Alonzo and I were never close. He walked his way and I went mine... but I loved him as any brother would.

"When I first went to Priscilla, it was to confess. But when she answered the door, she just said, 'Hey, Zo. How was your trip?' She smiled and kissed me and took me inside. 'Did you lose your keys again? You big dummy!' I just couldn't quite figure out how to tell her that I wasn't Alonzo. That her husband was dead. She was so happy and the news would've destroyed her. I swore I'd never hurt anyone again, and I intended to keep that promise. I convinced myself that giving Prissy a happy life was my way of atoning for my sins and honoring my brother."

"But you know you were just being selfish," I said.

He hung his head. "Yes... so where do you fit in this? Are you gonna turn me in to the Guerra family and collect the bounty? Or are you gonna tell Prissy and sweep her off her feet after? I know you're hot for her... any wise man would be."

I looked at him for a hard moment. He stared off at his shoes with a sad smile on his lips. Whatever his fate, he was ready for it.

"I'm not gonna tell Priscilla," I said. "*You* are."

"What?"

"She loves you, Al. It'll be weird for awhile, but she'll circle back to ya. Give her some time to mourn before you make your move. Six or seven months should suffice. When she's all cried out, wine and dine her, woo her like you would any date, and it's only a matter of time until you're out of the doghouse and back in her henhouse, so to speak."

He exhaled and shut his eyes for a moment. His eyes opened with even more despair and conflict in them.

"You're a lenient man," he said. "Maybe if you witnessed my crimes firsthand you wouldn't be so inclined to forgive them."

"You're different now."

"Sometimes I'm not so sure. When I said I brought the gun out of habit, that was a lie. I seriously considered using it on you to keep my secret."

"So I'm dead?" I snuffed out my cigarette and examined the backs of my hands. "Is this what it's like to be dead?"

"What? What are—"

"You *thought* about killing me? *Pfft*, I think about killing *all* my loved ones. The reason I still have a Thanksgiving Dinner to go to every year is because I don't do it."

"You don't get it. Violence follows me like back wheels follow the front. Sooner or later it always catches up and there's no way to guarantee I won't end up hurting Priscilla because of it."

I put my hand on his shoulder. He looked up at me, and I had a smile to meet him.

"You won't do that. How do I know? Because you love her. Making a change for yourself is hard. Making a change for the sake of someone else? Well, that's hard too, yeah. But you'll do it and you'll keep doing it. Now get your ass up."

He rose from his seat, his legs shaky and unsure. He smiled. It was shaky and unsure too.

"Now get home to your wife," I said. "Tell her everything, and when you eventually win her back, rock her world for the sake of us both."

"I won't forget this, Eli," he said. "I—"

"What're you waiting for? Go! *Vamonos!*"

I shouted at him until he was out the door.

This was the start to a beautiful friendship with Alberto Duran. Watching his struggle and growth in the face of meaningful change in his life reminded me of a well-documented fact I'm too often ignorant of: that there was nothing unique about my weaknesses, and nothing special about the recipe to overcome them.

The war for my body and soul would rage on, and I knew there'd be times in my life where I'd find myself in a bottle, find a cigarette in my mouth, find an excuse to sleep in. But Eli Wise would never stop fighting to change what he falsely believed intrinsic within himself. He'd find himself in the gym, find himself in AA, find time for the people he cares about, and he wouldn't let the demons of a life poorly lived stop him from sculpting a better one.

Satisfied with another case closed, I poured myself a fifth of whiskey, swirled it around, held it up to my lips... and poured it out the window. Right there in my office for no reason at all, I hit the deck and performed 50 push-ups, then rolled around for 50 sit-ups. Getting down to the work I had been neglecting all week, I was feeling pretty good about myself.

Until I got a text from Scarlett, asking me to come over. I was in the middle of texting "no thanks" when I noticed a photo attached. My heart cracked my ribcage and my jaw fell out my mouth when I opened it.

One demon at a time, I thought, and tried to justify it to myself. Okay, okay how about this? In exchange for a trip to Scar's, I'll make two extra trips to the gym this week. And, uh, no sugar or carbs for 7 days either. And if I break that, even by accident, then no cigarettes for a month. And if I break that, then I have to run 10 miles. In my underwear. With a big A for adultery painted on my chest. Alright, Eli. Sounds like we've got ourselves a system. This is gonna work...