

Chapter 1:

I Deal In Information

Seattle on a Friday night can be one of the most amazing experiences around. The sounds of the resident DJ fill the office as patrons begin to line up at the door, waiting for eight when they can come and experience what I like to call “the Lunchbox experience.” The experience is simple: Take one part 40+ hour working business professional, add two to four parts alcohol of choice, one part mind expanding substance, and 2 parts trance music played by some of the greatest DJs to ever grace the scene, and you have what has been dubbed “The Lunchbox experience.”

I own and operate The Neon Ballroom, which was purchased about 4 years ago from the holding company who previously owned the property. I guessed that business was either not good enough, or they wanted to get out of the contract. It could also help that I had a “conversation” with the fine folks who owned the property, and helped them to see that it was in their best interest to allow me to keep the business within the “family”. This was an icon of Seattle. I went there when I was a teenager, using a fake ID to get in and just experience the music. Some of the biggest names in the industry came through those doors and played in those hallowed walls. This place carried with it a legacy unlike any other.

We went through a little renovation. Neon lights all over the walls, transparent floors with various colored neon lights run all across, creating almost a rainbow-like effect. The furniture used was taken from the movie to attempt to recreate the scene. The resident DJ spined his sets decked out in a DIY neon mask which replicated his facial expressions. Some truly high tech shit here. We spared no expense, and it showed.

Our staff was some of the best bartenders and servers in the area. We poached and head hunted all the best talent from the west coast by filling their pockets with the greenbacks. We hired the best marketing companies to promote the club, and used our influence to buy media time. All in all, we were the landmark for Seattle. Applications for membership were numbered in the thousands. And we only opened up 10 memberships a year. We created the safest nightclub in town, and if membership restriction wasn't enough, then the half a dozen plus bouncers armed with military style weapons ensured the peace was kept. I live a life that only some can dream of, and yet I still felt a deep black hole that nothing seemed to fill.

We had three floors, and three separate stages for each. The main stage was for our resident DJs and the guest names that we booked. The downstairs was more of the uplifting trance, your 120 BPM trance that got your blood moving, and upstairs was our VIP stage for special occasions, and high profile clientele alike. These people were treated like royalty with a special bar and bartender, and special seating to make you feel like you were sitting on a cloud. My office was located on the other side of the club, a hidden gem with a special entrance. Only two people had access to my office: Myself, and my “better half” as I call her. The waitstaff had a key, but the card had to be coded each day to work. Call it a security measure.

The office was my home away from home, complete with a bathroom, couch, TV and more. The hardwood floors were redone and replaced with black marble to give a more neutral feel. On the wall on the left of the door was one of my most treasured possessions: A handcrafted sword from one of the last remaining sword makers in Japan. The very fact that I owned this sword went against everything that the culture stood for, since each sword is considered a national treasure. But yet it is mounted on my wall. The blue sheath inlaid with two blue emeralds with gold inlay. The handle was black, with a single blue emerald on the hilt. The blade itself was created from folded steel, 40 times over. The master who created this sword was renowned for their work, and the blade spoke volumes. The blade had never tasted blood and bone, and I intended to keep it this way as long as possible.

Next to the sword on either side were two scrolls: One said Honor, the other Respect. Two morals of the code of the samurai. But it also served as a reminder to me of the two most important things for me to remember. A small table sat below the sword, a small bonsai tree and decorations adorned the table. The trinkets were all given to me by various people, and each one told a different story. The walls of the office were painted black with an almost dark red hue to them. It created a very stunning visual display indeed. In the middle of the office, a small table with two chairs and a vase with tulips. Tulips were her favorite, and they were changed often to ensure that her memory continued on. The chairs were leather, imported from Italy. The black with gold buttons seemed to mesh well with the rest of the room.

Along the other walls in the office were several paintings, all original. The various paintings were purchased over the last few years from auctions. I had an affinity for Japanese art, and why wouldn't I? I attempted and failed most days to live by the code of the samurai. The simple fact of the matter was that I was no different than the thugs and criminals that plagued the streets, I was just more well financed, professional and well connected.

My office desk was made from cherry wood, imported over from Japan and handcrafted. The painting that hung behind me was one of the most famous Japanese paintings of all: The Great Wave Off Kanagawa. A reminder that no matter how much I thought I could escape, the demons would always be there. Tempting me, forcing the never ending cycle of human instincts. The painting was one of the original prints, authenticated by two different insurance companies, and the museum where it was purchased from.

Below the painting, my wall desk, with a small safe hidden within. A small closet off to the right of the table, next to the bathroom. The most expensive expense we had was remodeling this to include a bathroom. But I needed a place away from home, or when the shit hit the fan somewhere I could lay low. The closet had enough clothes for a week, and in the drawers below the hanging clothes enough guns and ammo to start a small war. Again, self preservation is king when you have the kind of life I have, where any day could be your last. If you don't come prepared, you set yourself up to fail.

As I sit at my desk, staring at my phone I hear the door slide open. I look up from my phone to see Amy, my "better half" and resident DJ come in holding two glasses. The door slides shut behind her as she walks across the room towards me. "I brought you a drink, figured you could use one after your day." Amy said, placing the drink down on the table before sitting down in one of the chairs in front of my desk. "Whiskey Sour, your favorite." She tells me, a slight smile on her face as she sits down in the chair. "Thank you love, I needed this." I told her, reaching forward to grab the glass and take a sip before placing it back down on the table. "Are you ready for tonight?" I ask her, checking out her outfit for the night and feeling the blood pressure rise a little. "I'm ready, but are you going to be here for the set?" Amy asks me, taking a sip from her glass before setting it down on the table next to mine. "As long as the city doesn't burn to the ground, sure. I do have to go see Sal tonight, so I don't know what that entails. But I will do my best." I tell Amy, grabbing my glass and taking a couple more sips.

Amy was one of the few people who had been through the darkness and back was my life. She was there when the family was almost ripped apart the first time. She was there through all the drug induced, coked out nights where there was more blow and booze than common sense. She stood by my side while she watched me self-destruct, destroying all that I had worked hard for, and even after "he" was gone, she never left my side. I didn't deserve her, and I knew that and she knew that. But she also knew that "she" wouldn't have wanted her to leave. I think some days that was the only thing that kept her going back then, before I got it together once and for all.

She stood five foot six without heels on, a natural redhead with green eyes almost the same color as emeralds. The eyes were the one thing that I was powerless over, and I couldn't ever lie to her when she wanted me to "look her in the eyes". She was very proportionate in height and weight proportionate, a little more in the right areas though. She was the one person I knew that could probably have caused an accident if she actually wore more form fitting clothes than she did. She showed off her frame, just not as much as she could have. And I think that was what was more the intrigue, not what was being shown but what *wasn't*. All I really knew was that either the universe or the devil truly enjoyed torturing us.

See, Amy and I had a history that spanned almost 2 decades. We met when we were 14, and it was almost like love at first sight. I was this dorky kid who hadn't broken out of his shell yet, and she was the girl next door. But somehow we found each other, and the bond was unbreakable. It was clear after almost 20 years now that she wasn't going anywhere. But it didn't mean that I didn't think everyday that she could pack up one day and that would be it. She did it once before, and I didn't do anything to stop it. Because I am an idiot, and she was looking for me to stop her. And I didn't, so the fact that all these years later she came back to the city that caused her so many bad memories I guess was someone trying to tell me something.

She had this almost goth take on the catholic schoolgirl look. She wore a black button top with a red tie, a black and red plaid skirt, her hair done up in pigtails with little spiky hair clips. Her eyes are a smoky black, purple color with dark red almost black lipstick. Her fishnet tights and boots did NOT help the situation one bit here. She wore a pair of bike shorts under her outfit to at least try to be conservative. She knew what the crowd wanted, and she also enjoyed teasing me because she knew where my line was. Didn't mean she wasn't going to try and push that line. She also knew when to stop, but that didn't always mean that he did.

"Well, my set starts at 11pm. So try to tell Sal that I want you back before then, ok? I have something special

planned for tonight.” Amy says to me, leaning forward to grab her drink, her top two buttons not done up showing off a little more cleavage and the black bra underneath her shirt. “Besides, you really want to miss all of this up on stage doing its thing?” She said to me flirtily, leaning back with glass in hand. “Well, you were always a tease of sorts, so no I don’t want to. But sometimes I must, you know that. It was part of the agreement.” I tell Amy, grabbing my glass and leaning back in my chair sipping my drink down. The whiskey almost seems to be melting away the events of the week.

As I stare off at the room, I catch the vase with the tulips. “Can we get some blue ones next time? I know that those weren’t her favorite colors, but I really want some blue ones.” I tell Amy, placing the glass back on the table and grabbing my cigarette case. “Ok. I will let them know downstairs to hit Pike Place tomorrow and get some.” Amy tells me, placing her drink on the table next to her. “Thank you.” I respond, grabbing a cigarette out of the metal holder and reaching for my zippo on the table. I flick the lid open and spark the lighter, the flame burning bright. “Bad habit you know.” Amy tells me, pointing her finger up in the air and moving it side to side as if to scold me like a child. “Everyone has to die sometime right? And I suppose it's better than the alternative.” my witty reply falling upon deaf ears, and even a deafening face. “Whatever.” She replies, getting up from her chair and grabs her glass.

She walks over to my closet and opens the door. “Don’t you need to change soon? It’s almost eight so the doors are going to be opening soon.” Amy says, shuffling through the closet of clothes to find a good suit. “Here. Throw this on for tonight. You are going to see Sal, so you know he hates when you wear your work clothes.” She adds, pulling out a black suit and shirt before digging through the top shelf for pants and socks. She drapes the slacks through the hanger, and the socks on the jacket. “I know he doesn’t. But I love showing up in my Dickies and T-shirt just to fuck with him.” I tell Amy, flicking my cigarette and placing it into the ashtray on the table. “But I know that you love it when I wear a suit, so I do it for you.” I tell her as I get up out of my chair and walk over to her, standing not six inches from her. Warm Vanilla Sugar radiates off of her, and she smells amazing. “Yes, because I think it makes you look more like a professional businessman and less of, not one.” Her reply has a little bit of a tone. It’s hard to let go of the past, even after all that has happened.

I take my T-shirt off, revealing multiple tattoos on the top parts of my arms and back. The back piece covered the whole back, and was a picture of a Samurai, coupled with some scenery. The tattoo looks as if it was ripped off of the canvas that it was painted on. Amy comes over and touches my back briefly, running her hand across the middle of my back. “Still looks as good as the day he finished it.” Amy comments before walking back over to her drink, standing around for a few.

I grab a pair of shoes from the bottom part of the closet and set them on the small shelf in the bathroom. “Ok, quick shower and then I’ll be down okay?” I tell Amy, smiling slightly to attempt to be charming. “Fine. But you tell Sal I want you back before 11, or he has to deal with my “scorn.” Amy sharply but playfully spouts out at me. Hell hath no fury like a woman’s scorn. “I will do my best, I promise. Now go so I can shower and get ready.” I tell Amy, making a slight gesture with my hand shoos her away. A moment later, she grabs the clothes and walks them over to the towel rack and hangs them up. She walks towards the door, drink in hand making a slight hip movement as she walks. “While I may hate to see you go, I do love to watch you leave.” I tell her, grinning evilly. “I know. And I also know you check me out a lot more these days than you did before. Trying to tell me something there buddy boy?” She asks, stopping just short of the door. “Nope, just like sightseeing.” I jokingly tell her, grabbing my cigarette and taking one puff from it. The majority of the cigarette is ash in the ashtray at this point. “Just checking.” She says, pressing a button on the wall. The door slides open and she walks out. A second later, the door slides back into place. “I can resist everything but temptation. And that is the temptation of walking.” I think to myself, walking towards the bathroom, drink still in hand.

I get undressed out of the work clothes and toss them in a pile, almost as if removing layers of bullshit from my week. I turn on the shower and get the water warm. A few moments later I step in, the hot water a welcoming feeling after the day. As I feel the water rush over me, my brain goes to the dark places again. “You know she’s going to leave one day, and you will be truly alone.” the inner voice tells me. “I know. And I hope that when it happens I can survive it. You almost caused me everything.” I tell myself, almost as if having an argument with myself. Well, I am having an argument with myself. But what do you expect from someone who suffers from what I have?

A few minutes later, I shut the shower off and get dressed. I take a sip from my drink which is slightly watered down now. Still drinkable though, I think to myself, so why not. I hear my phone ringing in the office, so I quickly walk over to my desk. “Hello,” I say into the receiver. “Mr. Rose I presume?” The voice on the other end asks, the voice being modified and masked. “That depends. Who’s asking.” I respond, caution in my voice as I open my bottom

drawer to pull out a small mechanical device. “That is not of your concern. What is your concern is that I deal in information, and I want to make a deal with you.” the voice responds. “Ok, you got two minutes, and then I am hanging up.” I respond back, flipping on the small device. “Well first off, you won’t be able to track this call as I can tell you are trying to do. And secondly, this information could very well save your life tonight. So you tell me how important it can be.” The mysterious voice says, a definite anger tone being conveyed. “And what do I owe you, and who are you?” I ask, knowing the answer to this won’t be anything good.

“Well, you owe a favor to be repaid at a later point and time. And as for who I am, I am a friend of Sal’s. And I don’t want to see Sal get himself into something that will drag you and others into. If you don’t listen to me you will not make it out tonight.” the voice adds, almost as if striking a sharp pain to my chest. “Ok. You have my attention now. Speak.” I say, sitting down as I reach for the case and lighter again. I spark up another cigarette as the voice on the other end begins to lay out specific details. “Tonight, there will be an event that will occur that will set into motion a course of action that cannot be undone. There are only two possible outcomes from this: complete and utter chaos, resulting in many people dying. The other option is that the event goes without retribution, and proper powers in place deal with the fallout.” The voice lays out the details, going into more detail about very specific things.

“Ok. Thank you for this information. So you seem to know a lot about me, but I don’t know what to call you.” I ask the voice on the other end, trying to buy a couple moments of time. “Time’s up *click*.” The receiver goes dead, the device on my desk beeps twice letting me know the connection dropped. “Shit. What the holy hell is Sal going to get himself into that is going to cause more chaos. We all know about the ceasefire¹, and as long as the agreement is still in place, we are going to be okay.” I think to myself, taking another drag from my cigarette before getting back up to finish getting dressed.

About this time, I hear my phone in the bathroom going off in my shorts. It’s eight PM the computer voice tells me. I quickly finish getting dressed and throw the dirty clothes into the basket next to the bathroom table. I grab my wallet and keys out real quick realizing that I hadn’t done this previously. As I walk out of the bathroom, I sit down in my chair and turn to face my painting. I open the doors to the shelf and put my thumbprint on the biometric scanner of the safe. The door clicks, and I turn the handle to open. Inside is about a dozen passports, roughly \$30k in cash, 2 9mm pistols with 2 mags each. on the bottom shelf is a stack of file folders, all containing damning information on a whole number of influential people. That is my insurance policy if I ever have to turn and burn. I grab the pistol and mags and put them on the top of the table. I reach towards the back and grab a small box out. Inside are about a dozen coins, all crafted out of gold with a design of two crossing pistols. (Yes, I am referencing THAT movie. But wait dear reader for what is in store.)

I grab out a couple coins and stick them into my pocket. I close the safe after placing the box back in, and close the doors to the table. I slide the magazine into the bottom of the gun, and get up out of my chair and walk over to my jacket. I open the closet door for a moment to grab out my holster and put it on before putting my jacket on. I walk back and grab my gun, opening the top left drawer to grab out a joker’s mask. No one but a select few have ever actually seen my face here, and I want to keep it that way. I must, as there are people who think I am still dead and buried. So I literally took my secrets to the grave in a sense.

The resident DJ is just starting to warm up with his set so it tells me that I am already late getting out. I reach into the center drawer of my desk and pull out a black credit card. I close the drawer and walk towards the door, making sure before that all the other lights in the office are turned out. I touch the wall above the button, the wall sliding away to expose switches. I flip the switches which turn off all the lights. I tap the button below, which slides the wall back into place and opens the door. I walk out, sliding the mask on my face as I walk out. The door shuts behind me. I slip the card into my inside jacket pocket.

The lights of the club kind of all meld into one rainbow of color, the sounds of Friday night filling the building as the set continues. Looking down onto the dance floor, you can see our patrons having the time of their lives. We offer a safe place to party, which is clearly apparent even this early in the evening. The dealers are all in their positions offering their wares, of which a portion is kicked up to us in exchange for offering “real estate”. There isn’t a vice in this city we don’t get a piece of. And if there was, well, let’s just say it didn’t occur for long. Or if it did

¹ The ceasefire was a set of rules for each family to abide by after violence overtook the city. It was negotiated by the board.

occur, proper tributes were paid in full with interest. We had an obligation to our patrons to ensure that their experiences were as pure and clean as possible. Swift actions were taken against those who attempted to pass subpar products in our club, or even in the city limits itself. As far as everyone knew, Seattle was just a metropolis like any other. But to those who knew the truth, Seattle was its own entity, governed by those who had seen the city burn and rebuild more times than they could count.

As I make my way towards the stairs leading down to the lower levels, Brittany, one of our waitstaff is leading a group up to the VIP room. Must be a bachelorette party, as one of them was wearing a wedding veil adorned with various colored mini candy "parts". "Have fun ladies, let us know if we can make your night any better." I respond to the group, waiting for them to walk into the VIP room before heading down. "You got tall, dark and handsome hiding somewhere?" One of the girls asks. "I can have something arranged." I tell her, looking at Brittany who is escorting them into the room. "Call over to Mark, have him send over a couple toys for our guests here. And let him know to put it on my tab. I will settle up with him in the morning." I tell Brittany as the last of the girls are escorted into the VIP room. "Thank you whoever you are." one of the girls responds back.

I walk downstairs towards the ground floor. The lights and sounds of the night heat up as the resident DJ continues to warm up his set. I stand off to the back of the room, hiding partially in the shadows. I can't shake what that person on the phone said tonight. Sal wanted me to meet up with him, he said earlier today. But why tonight, and what couldn't wait that he risked calling me during the day at work. Something was definitely up, and I was going to find out what the hell that was. I grabbed my phone out and sent a message to Sal: "on my way. Be there in ten-ish." I sent the message over to him, promptly deleting the message from my phone.

I head back towards the kitchen area which also doubles as our backstock room. Walls were stocked full of cleaning supplies, glassware, and other club-related inventory. Our liquor is stored strictly in the fridge which is locked and monitored 24/7. As I make my way back through the shelves I finally get to the fridge area. I grab my keys out and unlock the door, setting the lock off to the side. The large metal door makes a slight noise as I pull the handle back and open the massive door.

The inside of the fridge is stocked to the hilt with various liquors from all parts of the world. The more expensive bottles are kept on the top shelf. I grab a bottle of 18 year old whiskey and walk out of the fridge, closing and locking the door behind me. "This should be a nice gesture I hope." I think to myself as I walk out the back door into the alley. Parked out back is a Mercedes - Benz AMG GT-R, black as the night sky and slick as hell. The car is still brand new, and doesn't even have the actual plates on it yet. "Oh lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes -Benz." I sing to myself ever so quietly, grabbing the key for the car out of my pocket. The door beeps as I approach the driver's side door. I get in and place the key in the cup holder. I press the start button, and the engine fires up. The low hum from the engine makes almost a slight purring noise as it begins to warm up.

I tap on the display screen in the middle of the dash, and the screen comes alive with the menu. I tap on navigation, and select recent places. "Sal's Deli" is one of the top results. I tap on the entry, and the computer screen lights up with a navigation path. "ETA is approximately 5 minutes with current traffic conditions." the computerized voice replies. I head out from the makeshift parking spot towards the deli. The city is always so beautiful at night with all the lights and colors. Sad to think that all of this beauty and splendor came at such a high cost. As I admire all the buildings throughout the street, I think about all the things that were there before. And how that part of Seattle would forever be gone, save for a few places including ours. But that was going to change one day, we just didn't realize it would come as quick as it was going to be.

A few minutes later, I arrived at Sal's Deli. The little hole in the wall deli has been around since before Seattle was Seattle most would say. Passed down from generation to generation, the deli had been in Sal's family for at least 80 years. They still did things the old fashioned way here, everything was cut to order and handcrafted from scratch. The bread, an old family recipe along with their Italian dressing that they put on their subs. No one could make it the same as he did. At least 90% of the ingredients that Sal used in the deli were imported back from the old country. Sal's partner in crime and brother Antonio ran the business for the most part. Sal did the books, inventory and was the brains of the place. The smell of his deli could be smelled from at least half a block away, and god am I hungry.

I find a parking spot down the road, and throw a couple bucks into the meter. "I love weekend rates, \$4.50 for overnight parking." I mumble silently to myself, walking up towards the deli, the smells of the place making me

even more hungry by the second. I finally get up to the front door, where Sal's "protection" is sitting outside playing cards, sipping espresso. "Don't work too hard boys." I say to them jokingly as I grab the door open. "Ha Ha Ha smartass. He's inside waiting for you." Joey, the slightly thinner of the two, mentions me. "Thanks."

You know those places where one side of things is normal life, and you walk through the door and feel like you're transported to some magical place far, far away? Ok, well that isn't this place, at least in the way most would think. It does definitely have a different vibe, almost as if I was in little Italy and on the other side of the door was authentic Italian food. That was Sal's deli. I felt like Michael from The Godfather walking into the place. Almost set up the same way as the restaurant from the movie too, except no middle tables and the booths were replaced with shelves of products. You could buy all the ingredients to make your own sandwiches at home, Sal would even send you home with premade dough with instructions on how to bake. No one would ever expect the local deli guy to be one of the biggest influences in Seattle.

The meat counter was stocked full of different types of salami, cheese and vegetables. By the pound or by the sandwich, the freedom was yours. The chalkboard behind the counter listed out the meats and prices per lb. The signature though was his subs, and that was why most came here. "Hey Antonio, where's your brother at?" I ask Antonio, walking up to the counter and leaning my arms on the top of the glass counter. "He's in the back." Antonio says, going back to sorting out the deli counter case. Antonio is much like his brother, an old school Sicilian with a short temper, and an even shorter patience tolerance. One of the nicest guys I've ever known, but not someone who I would want to get on the wrong side of.

I come back around the corner, and walk back towards the back office. The slightly thin hallway consists of a bathroom, the storeroom where they store the excess inventory, and Sal's Office. The walk-in fridge is along the back wall. I walk past Sal's office to see that he isn't there. I go to open the fridge and shut the door behind me. The fridge is stocked with all sorts of bottles of wine, meats, cheeses and vegetables. Along the back wall however is the mini panel that shows the temperature. Directly below that there is a small red button, I press it. A couple seconds later, the wall makes a faint pop sound. I push the wall back to expose a set of stairs leading down underneath the building. I turn on the light switch and take a couple steps down before closing the wall behind me. This is Sal's actual office, but also his safe house. The building is guarded against all sorts of surveillance equipment, including heat signatures and thermal imaging from space. The blueprints of this building don't even show this. Reason being is that some years back, Sal's father bought the whole building, and converted part of it into housing. Most of his operations have run out of this building. And as for the other part, well I'm narrating that part.

As I get down to the bottom of the stairs, there is a short hallway that leads to the massive safe-like door. I walk up to the door and press the bell. A moment later the intercom turns on, static coming from the box initially. "Lunchbox, you made it. Come on buddy." The voice says, the door slowly opening to expose a large scale office. Sal reminded me of this character from a movie I remember watching years ago. It feels like now. Bleached blonde short hair, button down two-tone bowling shirt, black and red. His facial features definitely showed his age, as there were some beginnings of wrinkles. On his arms, several tattoos including two military tattoos showing his pride. Strange how he went from a serviceman to a mobster. And he truly lived the mobster life, and his office showed it. All over the walls of the office were rows and rows of guns, everything from baby pistols to military issued sniper rifles and custom made pieces.

"I need a favor," Sal says, grabbing the gold lighter off his desk, using it to light the cigar dangling from his lips. Now, Sal was not the kind of person no one said no to. "Ok." I reply, trying to hold back the now skyrocketing anxiety attack I'm having at this single moment and time. "Very good. I see that he taught you well." Sal says, laughing while exhaling the cigar smoke, filling the area around us with the smell. The smell of aged bourbon, cigar smoke, and men's cologne seemed to fill the area as we sat there discussing our business. "Sir, with all due respect, it is not nice to turn down a request from an elder, no matter the person." I replied back. My anxiety at this point has hit the point where my left hand starts to shake slightly. Gotta get to my pills without drawing any attention to it.

I reached into my pocket, and grabbed out the small tin that houses my meds. I also threw a few minutes in there, just in case. "Tic-tac Sal?" I ask, popping 2 xanax and trying to swallow. "What, my breath stinks or something?" Sal replies, the tone is one of angry questioning mixed with sarcasm. "No. Just grabbing one for me was all. Always taught to offer to others." I replied, the pills almost stuck in my throat. "Want a drink?" I ask, heading to the mini bar on the side of the room. "Nah, I still got one here." Sal replies, grabbing his glass of bourbon, proceeding to sit

behind his desk, a picture of a villa on the waterfront behind him, “ Cost me a pretty penny for this piece. Had it flown in from Venice.” He says, reclining in his chair. “ This is an original print. The artist is already being called the next Van Gogh. So naturally his paintings fetch a pretty penny.” He followed up, tapping his cigar against the edge of the ashtray.

“ You said that you had a favor you needed?” I reply, walking back towards my chair in front of his desk, drink in hand. “ Do you mind if I spark up? Been a hell of a day.” I ask Sal, reaching into my other jacket pocket to get out my holder and lighter. The little green metal tin had seen better days. The picture on the front was this old looking picture of two people out in a field picking Marijuana leaves, the caption below “Weed”. Inside was this little card, “ If found, please return to _____.” I never filled it out, but then again I never left home without it. This was one of the very first things that I bought with Ashley when we were first “dating” in a sense. I took my yearly trip to Leavenworth, and invited her up with me. The novelty shop in town was where I found this. And all these years later, it still stood the test of time.

The tin held about 10 or so joints, and \$4 in single bills. “Habit I guess.” I blurt out as if being asked about something. “Hope you don't mind.” I tell Sal, not really giving him much option to respond. “ Go ahead. It smells worse in this office.” Sal says, this cigar smoke mixing with the smoke from my joint. His mood changes almost instantly back to a serious look. “ Ok B, so here is the issue at hand.” Sal, his voice shifts to a slight anger. “We have some, we shall call it “competition” that has taken up residence down at the port.” His voice shifts to a darker tone. “Now, you know that we don't normally care. Follow the rules, pay your respects where due, and all will be fine in the world you know?” He tells me, reaching forward to take a sip from the glass before placing it back down again. “Well, it would appear that they have no regard for both law and order, and also the rules of the business.” His tone becomes a lot more angry. “I need a message relayed to them. I don't care how it's done, but they need to understand that they have disrespected the family, and that we are calling a face to face meeting to discuss this.” His tone seemed to almost immediately calm down, almost as if he was no longer angry. This was the scary side of Sal, this was that part of him that acted out of unprovoked anger. And when this happened, the body count and trail of destruction seemed to pile up, and pile up quickly.

“This is where you come in. I need the enforcer and his team.” He says, reaching into a drawer on his desk before pulling out an envelope. He throws the envelope towards me. “Standard rate, plus a little extra for your troubles.” Sal says, closing the drawer and leaning back into his chair, taking another drink from his glass. His cigar has gone out now, the ashes filling up the ashtray. “ Go talk to Michael. He will take your order and have everything you need delivered to the penthouse.” Sal says, reaching next to his ashtray for his cigarette holder. “I need this done quietly. Try to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed if you can. But if it can't be helped, well, that's why the cleaning crew exists.” His face goes blank, almost as if in deep thought. “Yes sir. I will handle this asap.” I told Sal, my joint went out after only a couple of drags. As I light up the joint again, I reach forward towards the envelope and open it. Inside was a slip of paper, a receipt for what looked like a deposit slip. “Wire Transfer to your account. Processed about an hour ago, paid in full.” Sal tells me. “ I made sure that the deposit went into the business account so you don't have to worry about blowback.” He adds, placing the now empty glass back on the table, grabbing the lighter and lighting up the cigarette in his mouth. The receipt shows the following: Wire Transfer, Date XX/XX/XXXX (leaving blank on purpose), amount: \$17,500. Recipient: Lunchbox Games. Account #: XXXXXX0675.

The hardest part about getting paid in advance is trying to stifle your excitement. This was well above what the average rate was for this type of request. Amidst my excitement, reality sets in that this kind of money means that more than just a simple message is being requested. This is a contract order. The team in question is a select few people I call upon for most of my wet work, people who don't mind getting their hands dirty up close and personal. I myself prefer to be a ways back in my vantage point. They can't run from what they can't see now, can they? So what is someone in my shoes to do? Can't back out now even if I wanted to, can't send the money back without raising eyebrows, and with this kind of money I can take care of a few things.

“Ok B, so I gotta ask something here. That tin you use, that thing has seen better days. Why haven't you replaced it?” Sal asks, trying to turn attention to something else to help break tension. “ Have I never told you the story? Ok. Well back when Ash and I were “dating” in a sense, we were in Leavenworth at this little novelty shop. I found this tin, and immediately fell in love with it. She gave me a little crap about the fact that why I wanted it was because it was a “weed” container. But this was the first thing that I bought with her.” I respond, putting out my joint in his ashtray. The trifecta seems to be working nicely now: Xanax, bourbon, and THC. What a fucking trip right now, like

as if everything in me feels about 100lbs, but also light as a feather. Never mixed the three before, so this will be interesting. “ I remember her asking me why I would have wanted such a silly thing, and I told her it was the perfect cigarette holder. But it was on that trip up there that I knew I wanted to be with her. She actually made me feel happy, a genuine happiness.” I add to the explanation, a brief smile across my face before quickly disappearing.

“Feels like yesterday I was just a normal person again. Boring life, crappy job I hated but paid the bills, wife, kids (all fur babies), and a simple life overall. She’s been gone a couple years now.” My tone changes to sadness. “ Of all the people and things in life I have lost and had to endure, I was not ready for this one.” I tell Sal, reaching across the table to grab a cigarette from his case. “One day we are planning the yearly trip down to Portland for our anniversary” the words seem as if small lumps as I try to speak. “ We thought that we had more time. We never expected that everything would happen so suddenly. Neither of us had any time to even respond or act.” The weight of the words are almost like stones now. “To keep the tradition alive, I still pile the girls (Our dogs) into the car, and head down for the weekend. We have a small place outside of town we bought shortly before everything happened.”

Quickly trying to shift focus back to the topic at hand here, I clear my throat and reach for my drink. “ So you told me that you want a message relayed, and that if needed action will be taken. But what kind of message exactly am I to relay?” I ask, trying to put things out of my mind. “ Yes, I apologize I only gave you some things.” He says, getting up from his desk and walking over to the mini bar to pour another drink. “I want you to pass along the message that any business that is going to be conducted in my territory requires permission from me. And that there are very strict rules. Ensure that he knows that failure to comply with both of these requirements will result in dire consequences.” Sal asks, closing the bottle and walking back over to his desk with his drink in hand. “I assume that this will not be an issue for someone of your skill set?” His tone gets serious again, but a tone that I only hear when shit is about to hit the ever loving fan. It’s the tone that can be the difference between me being part of the solution, or being part of the problem. I clearly don’t want the latter, so I respond very quickly and confidently “ Of course Sal. I’ll have the team together within the hour. Have Michael take the order to the storage shed. I can pick it up from there.” I inform Sal, swigging down the last of my drink. My legs feel like jello at this point, and trying to put the glass back on the table almost seems to be a challenge.

I asked a question I already knew the answer to, because several times prior it was hinted at. “ Just how far am I taking this message, if there are any.....disagreements?” My mind almost seems to require all the brain power to put the words together. The alcohol is slowly wearing off, so the feeling is slowly returning to my legs and hands. “ I want my message received. So use your imagination, you’re good at that.” Sal cracks a smile from ear to ear, a scary sight indeed from someone who would have you publicly executed for disrespecting his family. “ So however the events play out, make sure that my money, as well as my apology are given. There is no room for failure on this one.” Sal, looking at the wall to the left of him stocked full of various firearms before looking back at me intently. “ Find out who is their boss, and bring him here to me for a little conversation.” Sal says to me, waving his hand in a shooing motion towards the door. “ I suggest you take haste, as my patience level towards this person and situation is wearing thin.” Sal, done with the conversation, turns his chair around to face the painting hanging up behind his desk. “ Yes sir. Have a good night.” I respond, getting up from my chair and slowly walking towards the door. As I come up to the door, I open the large metal door, the door making a noise as it slowly opens. I shut the door behind me, the metal making more noise as it closes behind me.

I stop for a moment to gather my thoughts. This kind of message has to be handled extremely carefully. Any wrong moves, or misunderstanding and I will become just another victim of Sal’s anger, and another lost kid on the side of a milk carton. Except I’m not a kid anymore, and it won’t be a milk carton they’re pasting my picture to. As I start to walk down the hallway towards the storeroom in the back part of the building, I can’t help but feel this utter sense of doom. It could just be the bi-polar talking, it could be the OCD. It could also be the numerous chemicals running through my brain, having an orgy in my brain while my other senses attempt a coup against the evil forces.

Whatever it was, a few seconds later I was standing in the storeroom. This is where all of the things Sal doesn’t want stored anywhere else are housed. It looks like any other normal storeroom. Shelves are lined against the walls, bins and boxes lining the shelves with various short codes or things written on them. To the naked eye, there’s nothing there. But know where to look, and the box will tell you exactly what it stores. Towards the back of the room, there is a light switch next to what looks like part of the wall. I tap on the wall right above the light switch, prompting the switch to flip off. A moment later, a slight pop noise as the wall in front of me opens slightly. I push the wall forward, exposing the room behind the wall.

The well lit room is where Michael does all of his dealings. Michael, a well known and connected member of the community and also a board member on a couple companies here in Seattle, has used his network of connections to establish himself as the de facto leader in arms procurement. In this day and age, one cannot be too careful. The world that feels like an eternity ago went through the hardest four years since the Nazi Occupation. The world came to a slight peace only after a certain U.S. President came into office, and massive changes were passed through the legislative branches. But the issues did not disappear, they only went back underground. But they didn't go unscathed, as it had become illegal to show support for any type of Supremacist or Nazi propaganda. The bill empowered companies to take action against these offenses, banning platforms and issuing massive fines on anyone breaking the law.

Michael's nickname among thieves was The Reaper. He was the Lord of War out here, he kept the territories supplied with the only rule that peace must be maintained. He stood six foot four, jet black hair slicked back, rugged features across his face, showing the years of combat he saw back home. His eyes brown with a slight hint of black to them, as if his transformation into his nickname was actually occurring. His three piece suit was clean pressed, a pinstripe black and white shirt sat underneath a black tie. His shoes, Italian leather, shone under the bright lights. He sported a Rolex on one arm, and a gold bracelet on the other. His gold chain is barely visible underneath his tie. On each of his hands, a single diamond ring with multiple rows of diamonds in each. This was his trademark: Two sets of marks on anyone dumb enough to actually challenge him to a fight. He may have been big, but he was fast, he hit hard, and no one to this day has ever gotten back up.

As I walk back towards the desk at the back of the room, Michael stands up to greet me. "Evening B. Sal said you might be by later tonight. Sal said that anything you needed was on his account." Michael informs me as he comes around to the front of the desk. "Take whatever you need" He informs me, walking back towards the wall on the back of his desk, picking up a pair of pistols. He comes back over to me and places them on the table next to me. "Modified Desert Eagle .50 Caliber." He tells me, picking one back up, pulling the trigger a couple times to the sound of *click* *click*. "Modified recoil, reduced kickback. Comes with a modified silencer, and laser add-on for added accuracy. Shaved a few ounces off the weight in the process. Things still pack a punch, but when you need a show stopper, nothing is better." Michael demonstrates with the pistol before placing it back down on the table.

I walk over to the table with the sniper rifle setup on it. "I need three of these", referring to the M1A191 rifle setup in front of me. "Give me two of the AR-15s as well, two of the Desert Eagle's as well with scope, 4 flashbangs, 2 of the tear gas, 2 of the white phosphate. And 4 grenades." I tell Michael, ogling over all the weapons. I walk back over to the table with the pistols and pick one up. "Do you want anything else?" He asks, writing down in his ledger the stock that I have requested. Next to the order for each item is a plus sign, which means debt paid. "Uh, yeah. Can I get a Large Fry, a Large Coke, and two Apple Pies." I say, barely able to contain laughter as I horribly attempt to crack a joke. "Funny fucker. But seriously, y'all need something else. And the scope, laser dot or normal?" Michael's slight stern voice is a reminder that he is not one for stupid jokes.

"No. But I do need to ask for a slight change in normal delivery. I need these dead people brought to the storage shed. I can't trust things right now, and I can't shake the feeling like something is going on. Something big. Is this going to be an issue for you?" I ask, tones of anxiety come out despite my best interests. "No. I can drop them within two hours. I will let you know when they are dropped." Michael tells me, writing in the ledger under the order a brief note in code. I go to head out the door back up towards the front of the deli, as I approach the door I hear what almost sounds like a whisper: *Che Dio abbia a cuore i tuoi migliori interessi* (may god have your best interests at heart.)

I go back up the stairs and towards the door. I push the button on the side of the wall, which pops the wall back, allowing me to open it again. As I walk back into the storeroom, I push the button again on the wall. The wall closes behind me with a slight sound as it falls back into place. As I take a quick look around the room as I make my way back towards the front, I realize that there was something a little funky about some of the hanging meats from the fridge, freezer area. I might know Sal to a degree, but even there were certain things I didn't know about him. But I always knew this: He was from the old country, and lived the old school rules. Also, the boss was scared of him. And the boss wasn't scared of anyone, except maybe the Giovanni family. But they could scare the white off a ghost and force the devil to make a deal with them. The stories over the years did not do this family justice, and not even close to the reality of things. None of us wanted to cross. And anyone brave or stupid enough, well. they were

never found again. No remains, no trace, nothing. As if they just vanished from the face of the earth, any record wiped with their presence.

Walking back through the hallway of sorts back towards the front of the deli, I stopped and looked at my watch. "9:15. Ok, I have a little time to get this done before 11." I think to myself, starting a slight dialogue with my inner voice. "Lunchbox, you want a couple Italians to go. One for now, one for later?" Antonio asks me, prepping up a couple sandwiches for a pickup order. There were a few slips of paper to the right of the slicer, all scribbled down orders from people who placed an order to go. "Does a catholic priest put their hands on little boys?" I respond back, a slight jab at the current climate. "You know, I keep eating these damn things, I'm going to balloon back out like I was before," saying laughing but serious. "You want the peppers this time around?" Antonio asks, grabbing a jar from the fridge below. "Oh god no. Last time I think I created a new chemical compound in my bathroom." Saying, shuddering at the saga of the Italian and the poor destruction of my bathroom.

See, Sal's Deli was one of the few places in town that was essentially open 24 hours a day. Sal and his brother occupied the upper floors of the building, so anything considered "after hours" was 9:30 and beyond. So what they would do is prep the ingredients for sandwiches, and then when needed one of them could come down and make the order. This way, if someone was craving an Italian at 2am, which I had done more than once, it was there ready to go in a sense. Sal and his brother were kind of small-time heroes according to most everyone in the area.

"Alright. One sec and I'll have that up for you". Antonio tells me, grabbing the ingredients and throwing together a quick sandwich before handing it over to me. "One Italian, hold the peppers. Hopefully your bathroom will thank you bud." Antonio smiles, wiping his hands on the towel tucked into the front of his apron. "I have about a half dozen orders to whip out, so I need to get back to this. But it was good to see you LB. Go tell that girl of yours we said hi." Antonio, referring to Amy, says to me before going back to the order tickets laid out on the table. As I walk back around the front of the counter, I reach into my wallet and pull out a \$10 bill, placing it underneath the till. "Hey, I put it under the till. Thanks again." I tell him, placing my wallet back away and heading back towards the front. "I should get heading back over to the club. I can grab my other clothes and head out. This way, I can keep the suit clean this time." I tell myself, a handful of other unrelated ideas swirling around.

In what could only be described as a flash of light, a set of headlights shine into the deli momentarily. A second or so later, the front window shatters all over the floor as a brick comes crashing into the deli floor. The window glass is scattered all over the place as the car screeches off. I quickly grab one of the pistols out of the holster and disengage the safety, sneaking out the front door and looking around for anything suspicious. I get a couple quick shots off towards the moving vehicle, maybe hitting the bumper and the trunk. The car was too far for me to really get a good shot on.

"You made a grave mistake fuckers. Better drive off before we find out who you are, punk ass chickens." I yell, realizing that they can't hear me but the response seems to make me feel slightly less angry. I engage the safety again and holster the weapon as I walk back inside, glass crushing underneath my feet as I walk back into the place. I notice that Antonio is missing, presumably to go get Sal and let him know what's going on. My brain at this point almost becomes too overloaded, and I go to sit down, picking my sandwich back up off the floor. I must have dropped it amidst the chaos. As I go to sit down, I hear Sal's voice from down the hall, his brother's voice right behind him.

"Forget sending a message. NO ONE HITS MY PLACE OF BUSINESS!" Sal, shotgun in one hand, machete in the other, comes walking around the corner. My hands are shaking so bad right now, I can't even reach into my pocket to get the pills out. I'm having a panic attack mixed with anxiety right now. My BP is probably at a dangerous level right now. No one in all the years I have known people here, been involved in the game, or had ties back here has anyone so brazenly attempted anything on Sal's Deli. That is just asking for a death wish, because it isn't going to me coming after them, oh no. Sal will rally his troops, and bring upon them a hellfire unlike any before. And rally the troops he did. He put the shotgun down for a brief moment, pulled out his phone and made a call. A second later, I hear him respond into the phone: "Deli, now." *click*. He hangs up the phone, putting it back into his pocket before grabbing his shotgun again. Antonio comes back up front, boxes of shells and ammo in his hands. "Sal, let B take care of this. This is what he's here for. I don't need to lose another brother in this lifetime." Antonio semi pleads with his brother, knowing it falls on deaf ears.

“No. They hit my place of business. This cannot go unpunished. I'm taking the fight to them. I am going to put an end to all this once for all.” Sal, shotgun in hand, machete in the other, tells Antonio and I as he paces the deli, cursing in Italian and English. I know this look, I tell myself through the 999 other things running through my mind. Sal's “army” as he calls it is nothing short of trained mercs. All ex-military, special forces. These guys thrive on this type of thing, it's what gets them up in the morning. And they work as a single unit, nothing short of total fluid movement. Watching these guys train sometimes is scary how in sync they are. And he is about to unleash them on the city.

Something I never knew until I really thought was that exact moment, was that this wasn't just Sal's personal entourage of armed mercs. This was something far, far more crazy. The way they respected him, guarded his life with their own and all too happy to throw themselves in front of a moving bullet for this guy made a lot more sense in this aha moment. This was his squad from the old days. I think at that exact moment and time I could literally feel my asshole become as tight as a virgin before prom night. It always made me wonder, and now in that moment staring at the ground, broken glass all over the floor, one angry Italian with a shotgun and the other trying to reason with the first I really start to grasp the gravity of the events of the evening. I quickly snap back to the present, turning my attention towards Sal, who is still pacing the deli but this time with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“I'm coming with you. I need to make sure you don't end up burning half the city to the ground.” I tell Sal, quickly trying to open my sandwich and get something in my stomach to help with the panic and anxiety. I can't even hold the sandwich, my hands are shaking so bad. “I need to hit the storage shed. I need my vest and my rifle.” I tell Sal, my mouth full of food as I try to swallow the sandwich. “B, the vest and rifle are still in the trunk of the SUV from last time. We never took them out, remember?” Sal, slightly calmed down now but still loading his shotgun and grabbing shells out of the box and putting them into a small pouch. “Those are the spares. But I can work with it. Let me finish this super quick, and I will make the call.” I tell Sal, hunger kicking in as I continue to wolf the sandwich down. Hunger, mixed with fear and anxiety is not the way I had pictured my evening going.

“Sal, the last time that we had an incident of this type, half the city went into a frenzy. There was blood in the streets, and the bodies just kept piling up on all sides. That was why the ceasefire was called for. Remember, I thought I was going to be shot by at least one of the families trying to pull this off? And what was the agreement again, oh yeah that's right: no acts or vendettas against any of the families by anyone. That was the agreement.” I tell Sal, taking a moment between thoughts. “That was over 10 years ago now. That is why I am pleading with you on this: Let me take my team and find out. If they are associated with any of the families, then have at it. Kill them all for I care at that point. Not my problem to deal with at that point.” My words almost feel like they fall deaf in the air as the sound of vehicles fill the night air in front of the deli. The distinct sound of their vehicles could be heard through the sounds of the city, cutting the night air like a butcher knife into a block. You could hear the sounds of their vehicles before you could see them, black as the night sky and rode like the horsemen of the apocalypse. What was coming soon was going to be quick, loud, and bloody. This was his own personal army, men he either trained with, ran black ops with, or related either through blood or bound by debt. The sound was deafening.

“The cavalry arrived” Sal says out loud, slight happiness in his voice. Staring out the front window, two black SUVs pull up to the front of the deli. In the distance, you can hear the sound of more vehicles approaching. There are easily a small handful of vehicles out front now, at least four by the last count but more were positioned around the deli. This was just a sign of strength, nothing more. The real worry was the person inside the deli who was to command this small personal army into the very gates of Hell, as I quickly started to watch history unfold again. This time, I was older, had more to lose and my actions affected more people this time around. I always kept my distance from the nitty-gritty since I came back “home”, but tonight I was front row, center for what would become the night to end all nights. Sal grabs his keys from underneath the counter as he walks out the front door. “Alright boys, load up. Front and Center.” Sal shouts out loud as the sound of vehicle doors open and masked characters step out from the vehicles. Within moments the front of the deli is swarmed with over a dozen well armed guards. “Boys, we have a situation on our hands here.” Sal says to the crowd, shotgun down to the side of his body.

“Someone tonight hit the deli. I don't know who, but the note on the brick said Port. So my guess is our mystery guest is down at the port. So we are going to head down there, find out as much as we can, and put an end to this before it can start. Capiche?” Sal tells the crowd before cocking the shotgun and heading towards the back of the building where his SUV is parked. I quickly get up and head out the door after Sal, walking past his group of hired help. “Excuse me guys, I'm gonna head out with Sal. Meet us up at the port, but park down a little bit. We don't want

to draw any more attention to our presence than we need to.” I tell the group as I walk by. “Affirmative. Roll out ladies!” The squad leader yells out as I walk back towards the SUV. Sal already has the vehicle on and warming up. A slightly modified Tahoe, the windows are bulletproof as well as the body. The frame is reinforced steel, and suspension has been modified to take on the excess weight. Tinted windows help conceal the real threat in this vehicle: The trunk space. This is where all the big guns are stored, including a 6 barrel minigun. We don’t fuck around when it comes to what our job requires us to do. The gun was remote-controlled and hidden under the back part of the SUV. Sal was one of those guys I used to joke about would go down swinging, and take as many people with him as he could.

As soon as I get to the vehicle and get in, we start off towards the port. There is no room for error here. I grab my cell and dial out on my phone, a number well hidden in plain sight to those who don’t know what to look for. A switchboard operator picks up a moment later. “Client ID?” The voice asks firmly and professionally. “ Client ID is 8574320. Issue open-ended contracts. Currently pursuing an unknown assailant, possibly an act of vendetta, Sal’s Deli. Requesting a standby cleanup crew at Port Of Seattle. Authorization code 472518.” I respond to the operator, trying to focus on the task at hand as I can feel another panic coming on. “Hold please.” *beep* The voice on the other end disappears for what feels like five minutes or more. A few seconds have actually only passed here, as the other end begins to make noise again. “Contract has been received. Payment for services will be deducted from your account and held in escrow until close of contract. Deposit has been accepted.” The voice on the other end states before hanging up. “ Contract is set. If we run into any issues tonight, we have a cleanup crew on standby.” I tell Sal, grabbing a cigarette and lighting it up as we drive towards the port. I can barely light my cigarette as my hands shake almost violently. Sal, flicking a zippo from his right hand passes me his lighter. “Nerves getting ya kid?” he asks firmly, determined. “Never get used to this shit. I hope history isn’t repeating itself again. The city can’t take another bloodbath.” I respond, taking a long drag from the cigarette, filling my lungs fill.

Context of storyline - The “service”

Many moons ago, there was a very violent, very bloody gang war that started with two families, and quickly consumed the other families of the city. This caused major casualties on all sides, including civilian casualties and property damage. The cost to the city was tearing at the very foundation. The actions of the family that started this war were severe, and due to this a ceasefire was called. The idea was simple: The “service” as they were referred to would govern over the city as a non biased entity. The board had complete control over everything, and no major actions were taken without a vote from the board. Any actions taken without a vote from the board came with consequences that compromised an entire bloodline. The board did not accept nor tolerate insubordination. And their rules and conditions were simple: Each family owned a portion of the city, and their territories were their own to operate as they wanted. Each family paid their taxes to the service, and in exchange the service provided their services to anyone, anywhere, anytime. There were only two rules that the board made very clear: Designated locations within the city were considered off-limits for business, and any disagreements between families were to be brought to the board via a designated 3rd party. The board had dozens of people throughout the city and abroad. Since Seattle was considered the heart as this was where the “service” was founded over 20 years ago this was where they felt would be the best location for things. Seattle however was its own entity, a blip on a large map but the families wielded enough power within its limits to change the course of history as their pocketbooks saw fit.

To get to this point however, the families had to agree to sit in one room long enough to negotiate the terms. And it was up to us to facilitate this meeting. As the only truly neutral party in any of the dealings of the city, we serve as humble servants of the families, the board and the Giovanni family as needed. We had to be neutral, not allowing personal feelings to come between business. We are the peacekeepers, the balance to the counterbalance, but most of all we were the reason that the city kept running. We provided basic services to the community at large, mostly financed through our various business dealings and holdings that we had accumulated over the years. These business dealings were of both legal and illegal in nature. We offered services to those who had nowhere else to go, with the simple responsibility that favors issued out were favors paid in full. We kept local businesses open, and in return we knew everything our fair city did, and when to move shop when things came a little too close to home. Simple enough right?

Anyways,

As we get onto the freeway, the road ahead of us just seems to open out into nothingness. The city lights almost muted out by the sheer brightness of the night sky. The moonlight almost seems to fill the air with this bright light,

giving way for the stars to shine even brighter than before. This all seems to culminate into one hell of a night. The buildings and scenery, almost silhouettes against the night sky painting. The freeway is always quiet about this time of night, as off in the distance what looks like a caravan of black vehicles are ahead of us. Must be his people I think to myself between drags of my cigarette, trying to take in the night sky to deviate from the clearly shitty situation that I currently seem to find myself in.

See, they didn't just hit a deli. They hit the deli of a guy whose family has been a staple of Seattle since well before any of us were born. There were two families that started all this: The Giovanni family, and Sal's family. And this silent agreement has been in place for many years now with no disruption, at least that any of us remember or was severe enough to warrant attention. Sal's family has always been a target, but no one has ever actually tried to hit the head of a family before. And that is what happened tonight. And Sal will have absolutely no problem burning half of the city to ash in his pursuit of this person. And god help any of us who even remotely stand in his way. There is a reason that Sal travels with an escort.

As we continue to speed down the freeway in what feels like a high speed chase, but without cops my mind begins to wander to Amy, the club, my normal life and job. All of the things that I have in life, and yet tonight could very well be the last time I see any of them. I am not ready to go, just like I wasn't ready to lose her. And somehow cruel fate had decided that I wasn't going to be able to say goodbye. And it was the string of events that followed her passing that led me back here, my ass in this seat traveling down the freeway at 1.5 million miles an hour it feels like. Mere seconds pass in our descent towards the port. There are a couple of ways there, and we take the road less traveled. The trip from point A to point B may have felt like a long time, but was only mere minutes thanks to the driving skill of my driver here. As we get off the freeway, Sal grabs a walkie out of his center console. "Check in team." Sal says into the walkie as we make our journey towards the back side entrance into the port.

"Team 1 checking in." "Team 2 checking in." "Team 3 checking in." The response from the walkie one after another. "ETA two minutes. Approach cautiously, I want two vantage points setup on the outside." Sal informs them before putting the walkie back into the center console. "You're with me on this one. If things get heated, I need someone reliable." Sal turns to me and tells me, his eyes filled with silent rage. I can't imagine how pissed off he is at this point, given that he's been silent. We get to the back gate for the port, which is locked with signs posted all over about trespassing. Laws? Where we're going, we don't need laws. But in all seriousness, we about to break a crap load of laws, and we are just getting started here.

Sal hops out of the car, and grabs a pair of bolt cutters. Clipping the chains on the gate, he gets back in the SUV and we drive into the port. Parking off behind a couple shipping containers out of plain sight and well hidden. I go back and close the gate up, grabbing the chains to give the illusion it's secured. I take a quick look around at our surroundings, and then run back over to the SUV. Sal is grabbing out a few items from the back of the truck, as I reach under the seat, tapping on a hidden button that pops up the floorboard. I grab my vest, a pistol and two extra mags. I know that if we get into the thick of it, I may need the extra help.

As we walk through the port towards the warehouses, we take careful inventory of sounds and lights. The port usually isn't this quiet, but we are in the slower part of the shipping year so they're not usually working late. Good for us, limits outside distractions. Continuing through the port, we meet up with Sal's detail. They have secured the area, and have located the POI. "They have the two warehouses this way. I have two up on the roofs, and the rest of us are scattered around the perimeter. Just give us the go ahead and we are live." Squad leader tells Sal. "No. Not yet. Have the snipers keep an eye for a sign. If I flash it, move in and take out anything moving not on our side." Sal responds, adjusting his shirt slightly with one hand, holding his shotgun with the other.

"We are going in. If we aren't out in 20 minutes, or things go south, burn the building and any evidence. Cleanup crew is on standby if we need them." Sal adds as he walks towards the doors. I follow closely behind, pistol ready and loaded. Safety engaged, finger resting on switch. As we come up to the door, we can hear a faint noise coming from inside. Carefully opening the door, we sneak inside the building. The warehouse is stacked full of shelves and shelves of boxes, moving equipment, forklifts, and other machinery are scattered throughout. On the second floor are several offices. There are lights on in one of the rooms. That must be our mystery boss.

Looking around the rest of the warehouse, there are several guys sitting around a table towards the middle of the warehouse. Several crates are stacked off to the side, as well as numerous wooden boxes. "Ten to one says we crack

those cases and find our prizes inside.” I whisper to Sal, creeping closer through the warehouse. “What do we want to do here? I mean I count four at the table, maybe five. Anticipate at least two or three around, and one or two up in the office.” I tell Sal, gripping the handle of the gun a little tighter. “Go in armed and ready. Anyone makes a move, I don't hesitate. Just follow my lead and you'll be fine.” Sal tells me, walking out, shotgun pointing forward.

“Excuse me gentlemen, can you point me in the direction of the poor sap who mistakenly threw a brick through my deli window tonight?” Sal shouts out loud, slowly walking towards the people sitting at the table. Shock hits the table, as people quickly try to move, only to hear the sound of a shotgun shell fill the air. “Next one will be going in you.” Sal, reloading the shotgun with another shot informs our guests. “Sit down, shut up. Don't move. Understand that right now, there are two snipers positioned on either side of this building. There are also several well armed individuals outside that have been instructed to set this building on fire in twenty minutes if they don't hear from me. So, I would suggest you just listen to what I have to say, ok?” Sal, cool as a cucumber, tells this small group of people in a tone that undertones a challenge.

“Now. This evening, my establishment has the unfortunate occurrence of having a brick thrown through it. Now, naturally my first reaction is rage. Windows are not cheap, and take time out of my day to get someone out to fix it. Not to mention the temporary covering for it. On top of this, it appears that someone has taken it upon themselves to come into our fine city and set up shop without permission or blessing. This I cannot allow. Therefore, I am here as both a debt collector, and a negotiator. I request an audience with your boss immediately, and understand my patience is short, and my temper shorter.” Sal informs the group, this time a little more anger in his voice. A few seconds later, a figure appears in front of the office window. “Who the fuck are you? Boys, what are you doing just sitting there?” The mystery person yells down. “Well, you see I have a 12 gauge shotgun with about 20 extra shells with me directly pointed at your people here. My associate next to me has a pistol as well pointed at them. And I would trust in the fact that he rarely misses, even at this range it would be almost impossible.” Sal responds. “Now, how about you come down here, we can discuss business as gentlemen, and myself and my associate here don't have to be responsible for ruining your night.” Sal adds. Something is up his sleeve, I can feel it. This is not Sal, not one bit. And now, that panic starts again.

The mystery person starts to come down from the second floor office, accompanied by two heavily armed guards. “Wouldn't be any fun if they didn't make it a little interesting.” Sal laughingly says, grip still tight on the shotgun, pouch of shells hanging slightly off the left hip. As the mystery person came closer to us, their bodyguards pointed their weapons at us, prompting an immediate standoff. “Drop the guns, and we might let you walk out of here alive.” One voice says, Barely finishing the sentence, there is a shot through the upper window towards the back of the warehouse. The shot whizzes through the window before finding its mark in the wall opposite from its entry point. This took the three off guard long enough for Sal to say out loud “NOW!”. As if snapping fingers, there are two more shots into the warehouse, except these ones are aimed specifically at the two bodyguards' heads. One bullet enters through one side, and out the other, immediately spraying brain and blood with the bullet as it exits the skull. The second bullet wasn't as close to the skull. This one went through the neck, immediately causing the victim to gasp and grab his neck as he fell to the ground, bleeding out next to the other bodyguard. The mystery figure stands alone now, two dead bodies on either side. “Now, tell your people over at the table to toss their guns this way. And I swear to god almighty any more delays and I will burn you all alive.” Sal, firing a shotgun shell past the mystery person's head solidifies the statement.

“Now, let us discuss business like gentlemen. I presume that this would be a better course of action than what I can do.” Sal, ever the businessman, says to our mystery person, the people at the table are still frozen in shock. Staring at the small pile of weapons over by the table, I can see that this is either a small operation, or this is just a skeleton crew. Basic firearms and little tactical gear leads me to believe more column A than B. But the crates and boxes to the side tell me that there is more to the eye, so we better be cautious at this point. “Of course. Boys, bring the table and chairs over here for me and our guests.” He tells his lackeys, rushedly they brought over a makeshift table and two chairs, me grabbing a seat on a box off to the right. This gives me a wide angle to survey the area while these two discuss things. This will not end well. The negotiations will be short indeed.

“ Now, I presume that you are the person who seems to be causing issues here in certain social circles, not to mention affecting the balance of things. And to top this all off, someone here had the brazen balls to throw a brick through my window earlier this evening.” Sal, taking a seat at the table, asos, putting the shotgun down next to him on a crate. “Yes. That was me. Well, my men. But does this really matter? You are finished in this town. The

antiquated ways of operating are over. I have come to expand my business, but also to drag this half ass city into the 21st fucking century. So no, I do not have any patience for your kind, or any fucks left to give, *capisce?*" The sarcastic tone only gives way to anger. Sal, an unpredictable timebomb at this point firmly but calmly shakes his head from side to side, as if to give the facepalm, or the "Picard " as it was referred to, referencing pop culture.

"Ok, first off we live like a strict code of conduct, one that has served this city well for over 100 years at least. Secondly, this city is but only a small fraction of the sheer size of our reach. Our family stretches every corner of the country, and more. My associate and I are only cogs in a very large machine. And thirdly, said family has requested that certain rules are followed, to ensure peace and fortune. And you sir, are breaking every single one of those rules. So I ask sir, who do you work for, and why are you here?" Sal, reaching into his shirt pocket to grab a piece of gum out, sits forward slightly in his chair. "You can ask my associate over there. My family is blood. And blood crosses generations, and people. It is the blood we choose to share our lives with, not the ones we are born into. So with your actions, you are taking up a stand against my family. I cannot allow this to continue. So speak the fuck up." Sal, sitting back in his chair with his gum locked eyes with our mystery guy.

"Fuck you wap. Cannoli sucking greaseball motherfucker. I don't have to answer you, or any of your lackeys." The mystery person shouts at Sal, spitting the words out onto Sal's face like a slobbering dog. Within half a second as the mystery person is yelling at Sal, Sal takes the opportunity to smack the guy's head on the table a couple times. Each time the head hit the table, the sound was almost like a walnut shell cracking under pressure. That was definitely leaving a mark. Sal slams his head one more time for good measure, and then pushes his head back towards his chair. Falling back into the chair, then onto the ground, our mystery guy takes a moment to complain about his nose, something about it being broken, fractures, his eyesight not working right, and concussion. Of course, neither of us believed this bullshit, even if he did leave a good pool of blood on the table, and a nice pile on the ground. But nothing like the two dead bodies in the distance there, their bodies almost completely drained out.

"Now, I will ask again. WHO...DO...YOU.....WORK...FOR?" Sal's patience was gone. I wouldn't be half surprised if Sal just takes two to the guy's face and decorates the warehouse with his skull. I call it " Dead Motherfucker", inspired by modern art and snuff films, it is my greatest masterpiece. Nothing more fitting than a warehouse floor decorated in some guy's skull and brain. "I'd rather die than tell you anything you piece of shit." Mystery dude, spitting out blood and a tooth, yells at Sal. "Ok. I will grant your wish." Sal, grabbing the shotgun, walks over to the mystery dude, puts the barrel of the shotgun to the dude's temple, and pulls it twice. The first one splattered everywhere. Sal's shirt got hit a bit with blood and brain matter. Just watching the carnage unfolded is never easy. My stomach turns a lot, borderline throwing up.

"B, go find me some gasoline, and bring those bodies over here." Sal tells me, cleaning his face off with a handkerchief he kept tucked in his shirt. "Sal, let the cleaning crew take care of this. We need to get the hell out of here." I tell Sal, walking over to one of the crates. I start to look around for a crowbar, which I found sitting in a tool box a few feet away. I went to open the first crate, and with a loud creak the lid popped off. Inside was what appeared to be packaged bricks of either heroin or opium. The color is always the dead giveaway in most cases. And there are what appears to be about a half dozen or so of these crates. I start to crack open the cases one by one, and I find the exact same thing in each one.

"Sal, we may have a problem. I think we may or may not have just stumbled across about a baker's dozen of bricks. And I have a feeling that this isn't any of ours." I tell Sal, reaching into my pocket to grab my swiss army knife. I puncture one of the bricks on top, and take a small sample of the product out. " SALLLLLLLLLLL?" I yell now, panic setting in almost immediately. "WHAT?" Sal yells back. "Get over here. I have a really bad feeling about this." I yelled and panicked. Sal, leaving his current task of ridding the crime scene of evidence, comes over. I slowly move my knife over towards him. "Sal, correct me if I'm wrong, but things like Heroin and Opium tend to not have crystals in them correct?" I ask Sal, my knowledge on harder substances is not what it used to be. "That is correct. There is an urban legend that some chemist was working on a new drug, taking existing drugs and chemically modifying their properties. But that's just a myth, the end product would almost be too much. I mean the demand for the product alone would be worth billions. Once completed, they could make it cheap enough for mass production." Sal tells me, examining the substance a little further. "Jesus Christ. Ok, you get out of here. I'm gonna clean up here, and call this in. Seal the crates back up, wipe down what you can, and get out of here. Call Robbie, have him come down here on the double to get you back to the deli." Sal says to me, walking back over to continue with the process of removing bodies ``Hey. One more thing I meant to tell you earlier." Sal, walking back slightly

over to me. “Yeah, what’s that?” I ask him, sealing the crates back up, wiping the top of the crates as I close them.

“The love of a good woman is the best thing in the world. Don’t let that girl of yours slip through your fingers again. I know she would want you to be happy.” Sal tells me, sounding more like a father than a scary Italian who could kill me without hesitation. “Understood. Message received.” I tell him as I close up the last crate. “Ok, I’m calling Robbie, I’m heading back to the deli. It’s already past 11 at this point, so I am screwed. I called Robbie, and explained the situation to a degree with him. “Ok. I will be there in about 20. Hold on till then ok?” Robbie tells me. Chances are he is at home with Mrs. I either woke him up, or he is out and about and I caught him at a good time. When he gets here, I will be able to determine which one. From there, that will determine how much we’ll end up owing him for showing up.

Robbie was one of the few people in this life that truly did live on both sides of the fence. He met his wife working for the family, and when they got married he told her the truth beforehand. We wanted nothing but the best for them, and so we set them up when they got married, with the only stipulation that we would need favors called from time to time. Robbie was a good guy, not necessarily a straight shooter but a good guy. But he was always there when we needed him. And we did our best to keep him from the seedy side of things. There was this almost unspoken rule of sorts that once someone got married, we distanced ourselves from them for their protection. We always made sure to take care of our people, put them in legitimate positions, usually upper management or executives. This way they could still make their living, but also serve our interests as well. As businessmen, we had to expand our business both legitimate and illegitimate. So we buy small companies up, invest seed money into them, grow them into larger companies that we install our people into at higher level roles. They then grew the company on their own with the money the company was making. Small investments were giving us huge returns, and quickly. But also more so than that too was how fast our business expanded on the other side as well. But this was what the current day and age required of us.

Robbie grew up in the school of hard knocks. Built like a boxer, childhood was not the most pleasant experience for Robbie. Due to his size and stature, he found himself in a lot of fights. But what doesn't kill us only makes us stronger right? That was the case here. By high school, Robbie was easily over 6ft tall and decided to put that height and strength to work. Training every day down at a local boxing gym, Robbie fine-tuned himself into a boxing sensation. Won a few fights even when the mood struck him to go toe to toe in the ring. He wasn't a violent kind of guy, so it wasn't always easy to get in the ring. But what one person saw as a boxing match, he saw as a good opportunity to spar with someone, and walk away with pocket money. But what always got me ever since I knew him, was that he was always in a suit. But maybe that was personal preference. Just always something that was odd.

We were businessmen in a day and age where greed was good, corruption was rampant, and anyone with enough money and influence could own the world. But on the same side of the coin, we had seen the largest explosion of economic growth unlike any other. Legalization of Marijuana was the single largest contributing factor to paying off our deficit. We actually became a country that had a surplus, people were getting out of poverty, and things were starting to look like an actual developed country. And it was because the legalization was lobbied for by the dark powers that be, that allowed the economic growth to occur because employment needs exploded.

As I walk out of the warehouse, the night air hits like a slap in the face. Seattle weather is like rolling a dice and calling a number most days. But tonight, it's perfect. I light up a cigarette while waiting for Robbie to show up. I open my phone and see several messages from various people, including Amy. I start to type something out, and then immediately delete it and close out the message. “She doesn’t need the distraction tonight.” I think to myself, various thoughts running through my mind in those few minutes before Robbie finally shows up. As he pulls up, I drop the cigarette butt and put it out. I bend down to pick it up and shove it into my pocket momentarily. Once I get to Robbie’s car, I quickly toss it into his ashtray.

“What in the actual fuck are you thinking? Jesus H. Christ, when “he” finds out, all goddamn hell will break loose. What drove you two to go all coked out cowboy here?” Robbie, ever the voice of reason yells at me as I opened the door to toss the cigarette butt. “Robbie, you know, it isn't like I woke up this morning, and said you know what would be fun today? Let’s start an all out war between the families because someone is going to light the match to start it all off. No. That was not my intention at all.” I respond sharply, with sarcasm mixed with anger, frustration. “You don't know the whole story Robbie, so chill. I’ll deal with “him” when the time comes.

"Boys, might I make a suggestion here?" A voice chimes in from off in the distance, coming closer. One of Sal's guys is standing next to Robbie and I. "Of course." I tell him, scratching my face slightly. "Let's get out of here. Cleaning crew has already been dispatched, and we need to disappear." He tells us before walking away towards the vehicles parked off a ways back. "Yes sir. We are on our way out now." I tell him, getting in the car and shutting the door. "Take me back to Sal's please. I need to get back to the club, but I also have to drop off Boss's car back at his place." I tell Robbie as I buckle in, grabbing my phone to look at the time. It's a little after midnight. "I am so screwed right now, I don't even know what to say. Amy is going to have me by the short hairs at this point." I tell Robbie, a little fear in the voice. Hell hath no fury like a woman's scorn. A couple minutes later, my phone goes off. A picture message comes in of Amy at the club, with the caption "you need to be here." I close my phone and put it back into my pocket. The events of the evening are still swirling around in my head like a bad dream.

"Thank you by the way. I know that my thanks falls on deaf ears some days, but I still want you to know I am grateful for you coming." I tell Robbie, slightly closing my eyes for a moment. "We could have used your skills this evening in defusing the situation, but I didn't want to get you involved in this. It will be a matter of time before we see the consequences of our actions here." To add to my response, my eyes closed all the way as if the eyelids themselves weighed 10 lbs each. "The worst fears may come to life. The ceasefire has been the only thing keeping the families from ripping each other apart. And if any one of the families thinks that the other family or families took vengeance against them, oh god." My voice, shaky and scared, squeaks out the words as if they are being forced. I reach into my pocket and take another pill, trying to slow down the brain at what could very well be the beginning of the end.

A few seconds later, my phone buzzes again. I open my eyes to look at my phone. It's Sal. "A rough estimate of baker's dozen is about 3-6m wholesale. Until we know what exactly it is, it's hard to determine. Professional setup though. Might not be one of the families." The text message almost seems to pierce my heart. "So, new players in the game, well financed to be bringing in that much product if estimates are correct. New drugs too, possible issue with mass flooding. Do we tell him, or do we try to resolve it on our own?" My response back is almost as heart piercing as the initial response. This changes things I think to myself. If this stuff gets out onto the streets, there could be massive mayhem. My phone beeps again "two crates of small munitions. mostly handhelds, some mid level, and a handful of high level. Nothing tactical" "Ok, so they're gearing up for some kind of war. You think they're trying to muscle in here, or just use us as a point of entry?" "Possible. We need more information on this. But whoever they are, they still crossed the line. Partial justice paid." "I agree. But we have to be careful about this. Sleep on it tonight, we will regroup tomorrow." "Ok."

"So, what are you going to do about all this? And you know Amy isn't going to stick around for this shit again right?" Robbie tells me, almost as if he was reading my messages as they were being sent. "I don't know Robbie. I just don't know. What I know is that I'm popping xanax like candy, I take more meds than most people, and that more and more these days it's getting harder and harder to ignore the dark place. Robbie, she isn't going to stick around. I know this. There isn't anything I can say or do at this point to change fate. So, while she is here I am going to do everything I can." I respond, shakiness in my voice as I start to slowly break down. "You know, Ashley wouldn't you to be like this man. This wasn't who you were. Yes, she's gone, and you know you can't change that. But she told you to be happy, and you have spent all this time not being happy. Not to mention ignoring the one constant in your life since she passed that maybe, just maybe could actually make you truly happy again, and you're gonna sit here and complain that she's gonna leave. It's talking like this that is going to make her leave man. I hate to see you like this, but you gotta pull yourself back from that place man. You deserve happiness just like anyone else in life. So don't let this opportunity pass you by again." Robbie, ever the fountain of knowledge, direct from the school of tough love, suck it up buttercup. "Y'all have been attached at the hip like two puppy dogs since you were teenagers. She was the first one you actually said those words to, and she was the one that watched you almost kill yourself at least once. She loved you, and you loved her back. But you never actually told her that you loved her enough to give it all up. She would never have asked you to, but she wanted you to show that she was more important than this life. And you couldn't do it." Robbie's lecture is going to hurt a bit, but we have a while before we get to the deli, so I'll take it in while I can.

"Robbie, you know why. I couldn't show her why I did what I did. She wouldn't have understood, not then at least. Maybe now, but I've hidden it from her: the medications and the appointments. How do you stop and tell the person who has always been what felt like a soulmate that you're bat shit crazy, you have to take multiple medications a day just to deal with life, and that one day you're afraid that you'll have a bad episode and hurt them?" Attempting to

hold back emotion by saying this, I light up a cigarette and roll down the window. "Robbie, I didn't almost OD those times because I had been partying too hard. I did it because it was the only way I could see of getting out without hurting anyone. See, I fight demons inside of me everyday. And sometimes I win the battle, and sometimes they do. And sometimes I can't even go to the grocery store without taking two xanax, and even then still having some anxiety. So the medications I'm on mess with me, something fierce. And when I'm having a bad episode, well those meds just amplify it. I wanted to die Robbie, I no longer wanted to feel that sadness, that fear, anxiety, pain, sorrow. I no longer wanted to carry the burdens of my mental health issues anymore. I had run out of gas, the tank was empty, the engine blew. And yet, every time I tried, all I could think about was how I was going to hurt one person more than anyone. But in the end, it was for the best." I tell Robbie, my hands are shaking, the cigarette shaking in my hand as I try to take a drag.

"But we always have a choice B. Sometimes we have to be stronger than our choices. If we never rise above our transgressions, then we are destined to fail. You are not rising above those things B, you are allowing those things to keep you down. I think you need to go reflect on that painting of yours a bit, get your head back in the game here. I think that you have a good thing going, and that you can maintain the balance between the two if you want. But at some point and time, the bill becomes due and you have to pick a side. Just make sure you know which one is the right one ok?" Ever the master of knowledge it seems, the words just seem to only compile onto the already thick layer of guilt for not being there tonight. "I'm going to have to tell her everything." I think to myself, the cigarette has been helping some to calm the nerves. But more than likely it's the xanax I've been pumping into my system like candies.

My phone buzzes, it's a message from Amy. "Here's a little of what you're missing out on." The attached picture is from the club. She took a selfie of sorts to rub it a little further in the wound. I close the message out, putting the phone back into the pocket. "I wish my wife would send slightly naughty pictures to me for no reason" Robbie scoffs, rolling down his window as he lights up a cigarette. "How did you--" I ask, perplexed, and curious. "B, she's been doing that to you for as long as I've known you two. That was just y'all's thing. That was why I knew that that was what she sent you." Robbie responds. "We're a couple minutes out from the deli at this point. Are you sure you're gonna be okay?" Robbie asks me, a slight tone of concern in his voice. "Nah. I'll be fine. I'm gonna attempt to catch the last of her show, take Boss's car back home, and then head home by myself." I tell him as we approach the exit for the deli. The deli is just a bit of a distance from the freeway. The car seems eerily silent for the last few minutes before getting to the deli. As we approach the street, we see that the deli is marked off, and there are cop cars in front of the building. "Are you really sure you're gonna be okay?" Robbie asked one more time, knowing my history with cops in this town. "I'll be fine. I will text you when I get home okay?" I tell him, getting out of the car and walking down towards the cops and the deli. Robbie turns around and heads back home.

As I get closer to the deli, there's a uniform officer standing on the other side of the tape. "Stop, this is an official crime scene sir. I can't let you past this point." The officer tells me. "OH the sweet sound of hope still present in their voice. He must be a rookie, oh this will be good" I think to myself. "Officer, who is the lead detective on the scene?" I ask him, pulling my phone out of my pocket and pulling up my contacts. "Officer O'Grady sir." The officer tells me, a slight hint of entitlement in the voice. "Hehehehehe, oh this will be too funny." I grin to myself, scrolling down to O'Grady. I press the call button. A moment later the other line connects: "Detective Grady speaking." The voice on the other end, rugged, unshaven, heavy drinker, light smoker, good at the job, and stubborn as hell. "Grady, it's Brandon. I'm out front. I need to get to the deli to get to my car." I tell O'Grady, still standing in front of the officer in front of me. "One sec. I'll send a uniform to get ya." He tells me as he hangs up. "Now, I wait." grinning almost ear to ear now.

"Mr. Rose, Detective O'Grady has sent me to come get you." the uniformed officer informed me. "Yes. Thank you." I tell him as I cross under the crime scene tape, looking at the cop and giggling slightly as I walk away. "You're an asshole, you know that right?" the uniform tells me. "Yup. But since my boss pays for most of your guy's salaries through all the hard work and tactical moves that we lowly people do, I think I have earned the right to be as big of an asshole as I want, to whoever I want, for whatever reason I so choose at that moment of time. So how about you go do some actual police work, and leave the heavy lifting to people like me huh?" My response was a flurry of jabs against the police department. What jokers these guys are. Cops around here are just the face of the justice system. We end up doing most of the dirty work, and they take all the glory. It's a bad trade off initially, but it gives us carte blanche to be able to run our businesses without any oversight.

“Well, just don't go touching anything in our crime scene ok? Don't need your dirt dirtying up our crime scene. Your presence is already doing a good job of that. “ The cop tells me as he leaves. “Will do kind sir. And a good night, fuck you to you too.” I tell him, walking into the deli where there are two more cops alongside our friendly neighborhood detective. “Detective O'Grady. What are you doing up past your bedtime?” I jokingly said to him, being careful to walk around the broken glass on the ground. “Nothing much. Got a call about vandalism, never would have expected it to be Sal's. Any leads on this yet B?” He asks me, knowing as a courtesy I can't say anything back to him but “Nope. Sorry.” “ Figured. Well, what can you tell me about tonight? Let's start with where you were.” O'Grady, pointing over to a table in the corner, starts to walk towards. “Let's take a seat and talk a moment.” he tells me. I know now to refuse, that will just give him probable cause. “So where were you tonight?” his question seemed to linger in the air a moment. “Club since 8, stopped off here about 9:30ish to get a sub. Was here when the brick went through the window though, didn't see the vehicle. Sal and I went looking for some kind of clues. Couldn't find anything, came back here.” I respond, looking at my phone briefly.

“So you didn't see anything else though, anything else of any kind that might help us?” O'Grady asks, already knowing what my answer is on this. “Nope. Sorry bud. Wish I could be of more help to you.” I tell him as I walk out of the deli and around the corner towards the car. “I don't trust him. Put someone on him, see where he goes tonight.” O'Grady tells one of the officers shortly after I leave. “Yes sir, right away.” the officer responds. The officer calls in for surveillance at the club, but also at the deli itself. As I get to the car, I grab the keys out and fire up the engine. The car fires right up as I head out from his place, my head in a hundred different places right now.