

Strange Connections

By
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*For my Guru
Shri Dhiresh Chandra Bhattacharya*

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SETTING

The stage is divided into three segments. Ralph's office is at the center. It is a modern, stylish, imposing room with a center table and a few chairs. A laptop, a few files, folders, pens, and other office accessories are on the table. Everything is black. The entire back wall is made of glass, through which the river and city skylines are visible.

The Basement, on stage left, has a small table and two chairs. A paper binder, a manila folder, a water bottle, a few plastic glasses, and two large coils of rope are on the table. These are very shabby, flimsy, and utilitarian.

Mary's Living Room is on stage right. There is a small round table, a few chairs, and a TV.

At first glance, it looks like all three sections are part of the same room, though the contrast between the central office and the other two segments is striking. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that these three sections are spatially and temporally distinct; they represent entirely different places and times.

When the play begins in the BASEMENT, where the interrogation is taking place, the other areas are barely lit, with only a faint outline visible.

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TECHNICAL NOTES

When the action switches from the BASEMENT: PRESENT to the OFFICE: PAST, the light changes will be slow. The BASEMENT gradually fades into the darkness as figures appear slowly in the OFFICE. However, the switch from the OFFICE: PAST to the BASEMENT: PRESENT needs to be abrupt and striking. The characters in the OFFICE are suddenly plunged into darkness as the actors in the BASEMENT become visible. Similar changes will accompany a shift in action from the office to Mary's living room and vice versa. These light directions are provided in the script.

Dress changes will be tricky. However, dress changes are secondary issues. The story needs to move very swiftly from one area in time and space to the other, and the dress changes should facilitate, not hinder, the transition.

SFX: Hammering sound.

The sound is a strange hammering sound that only Ralph can hear. At the very end, it will become clear that this is the sound of Murphy's crutches.

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MURPHY is tied to a chair. Her large handbag and walking crutches are on the floor. SOFIA is checking Murphy's pulse. RALPH is standing on the other side, sipping his wine. He is in an excellent mood.

RALPH. She isn't dead. Is she Sofi? That will completely ruin the fun.

SOFIA. No, sir. Just unconscious. She will be fine.

RALPH. Wonderful, marvelous. I really admire your skill with poisons, Sofi, *(winking)* and many other things.

SOFIA. *(Not paying any attention to the innuendo)* I live to serve, sir.

RALPH. Yes, yes indeed. Now- now we have you, you gimpy freak. Now we'll see. We will wring the truth out of your crippled shell. By the way, excellent wine, Sofi. It does have a strange aftertaste. I kind of like that.

SOFIA. I am glad to hear that, sir. I live to serve. *(Murphy starts shaking; she is waking up.)*

RALPH. Aha! Our little songbird is finally awake! Isn't she, Sofi? *(Sofia quickly checks Murphy's pulse.)*

SOFIA. She'll be fine.

RALPH. Great! We'll have our answers soon.

SOFIA. I'm not so sure, sir.

RALPH. What do you mean?

MURPHY. Water ... water ... *(Sofia looks at Ralph, who nods.)*

RALPH. Go ahead, Sofi. We need to show hospitality to our guest. *(Sofia pours a glass of water and puts it in front of Murphy's lips. Murphy takes a few sips. Ralph finishes his wine and pours more for himself.)*

MURPHY. Where am I? What's going on?

RALPH. Welcome back, Ms. Murphy, welcome back.

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MURPHY. I was in your office! What's going on? What is this place?

RALPH. Oh! Just a tiny basement in Sofi's house. Sometimes I "rent" it from her for my business.

MURPHY. Your office is larger than a freaking tennis court, and you rent a basement for business!

RALPH. For special business, Ms. Murphy. The business that I want to keep away from prying eyes, away from the walls that have ears, away from *you*. How long have you been spying on us? Who is feeding you all the information?

MURPHY. Spying on you! What are you talking about?

RALPH. *(Big sigh)* You want to play hardball? Fine. Go ahead, Sofi.

SOFIA. *(Caressing Murphy's hand)* I will start with your right pinky, Ms. Murphy, your functional hand. Then I'll break your ring finger, then your middle...

MURPHY. I don't understand! What are you talking about? What do you want?

RALPH. Let's get on with it, Sofi. She will not cooperate. *(Ralph pours more wine. For the next part, Ralph will keep drinking and slowly get drunk, much more than normal for a man of his stature. Sofia nods and starts bending Murphy's pinky.)*

MURPHY. No, please. Help ... somebody ... please help ...

RALPH. Nobody will come, Ms. Murphy. There are no Unsung Heroes in the museum, no friendly spirit in the depths of the Anacostia River. There's nobody to help you.

MURPHY. Please ... please ...

RALPH. You don't have any military training. You will eventually tell the truth. Why bring such torture on yourself? You don't need any more broken things, do you?

MURPHY. Why am I here? Why are you doing this? What personal business can you have with me? Did you put something in my drinks? What about the felicitation and award?

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RALPH. What award! Ms. Murphy, your stories are trash, plain and utter rubbish.

MURPHY. You just handed me the award in front of an auditorium full of people!

RALPH. Don't let it get into your head. Those were all for show.

MURPHY. For show! I don't understand!

RALPH. Ms. Murphy, I created this award specifically for you. I designed it, with Sofi's help of course, so that you would be the strongest contestant. I am sure Tracey would have been proud of you, Sofi. You came so far in such a short time.

MURPHY. Strongest contestant!

RALPH. Don't you remember the selection criteria? Female writers in their early thirties, residents of the Midwest, with disabilities, either cognitive or physical- how many people fit that description? Sofi gave me this brilliant idea to lure you in.

MURPHY. Why would you do that? And what about the judges? They are all very reputed names, famous people...

RALPH. The more famous you are, the easier it is to manipulate you. Money talks, Ms. Murphy, and there are many other ways.

MURPHY. But why?

RALPH. Because I wanted you here.

MURPHY. In this basement?

RALPH. In front of me! Of course, I could have planned something else. Send my new negotiator, that's Sofi, to kidnap you. Or I myself could have gone to your dingy apartment- but no, this was way more convenient. Nobody will have any suspicion; everybody knows now that you are attending the private dinner with the award sponsors. Timing is everything, Ms. Murphy. This is perfect.

MURPHY. What do you want from me?

RALPH. I want answers, the absolute truth.

MURPHY. Truth about what?

RALPH. How exactly are you doing this?

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MURPHY. Doing what?

RALPH. Don't play coy with me; my patience is already running thin. How are you getting the information? Who is working for you?

MURPHY. What are you talking about? I have never even seen you before today! Well, that's not exactly true.

RALPH. Have we met before?

MURPHY. I wouldn't call that a meeting. I saw you once during your rally in Iowa.

RALPH. Iowa rally... Iowa rally...

SOFIA. A few years ago, sir. You participated in a political rally with Ms. Lendoffer.

RALPH. Oh, yes, yes! Were you in the audience? I was good, wasn't I? Really captivating, I'm sure!

MURPHY. I was with the reporter for the local newspaper.

RALPH. I see, a reporter.

MURPHY. Actually, I was the photographer. That's the first time I saw you.

RALPH. You! A photographer! Why would anybody hire you to be a photographer? Can you even hold a camera? Hah! No wonder the country is going down. When was this, Sofi?

SOFIA. June of 2019, sir.

RALPH. June of 2019 ... June of 2019. Hmm. I thought you were working at Mary's diner that summer. Wasn't she, Sofi?

SOFIA. Yes, sir.

RALPH. And living in Mary's house, sharing a room with those ragtag rabbles.

MURPHY. How? How do you know?

RALPH. Ms. Murphy, we have been following you for quite some time. A small-town girl with a physical disability trying to establish herself as a writer. Nothing special, nothing extraordinary. And yet ... How? How are you predicting things so accurately?

SOFIA. With all due respect, sir, she is not predicting. A prediction has some elements of uncertainty, some degrees of

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probability. She is unerringly telling *you* what *you* will do.

RALPH. *(Nodding)* She accurately tells every aspect of my plan, every tiny kink ... and she writes these explicit details even *before* I formulate a plan! How's that even possible?

MURPHY. Can you please tell me what exactly I did? I don't understand.

RALPH. Sure, you don't. Ms. Murphy, how many stories have you written so far?

MURPHY. How many stories! I don't know why ...

RALPH. *(Banging on the table)* How many stories have you written so far?

MURPHY. Around four or five, maybe.

RALPH. Four, precisely four, not five.

MURPHY. Four? *(With a strange smile)* Oh yes- four published. Why do you ask?

RALPH. Do you remember your first one?

MURPHY. First one?

RALPH. Yes, yes! The first story?

MURPHY. I do! "The stargazer." People never forget their first, even though it's rarely any good. *(Ralph gestures at Sofia, who picks up the binder and starts reading slowly. Ralph pours more wine.)*

SOFIA. "Dark suit, dark beard, and a dark heart, Cornelius was sent to accomplish a dark deed for his dark master. Alas! He never knew that destiny had other plans for him..."

(As Sofia reads, the BASEMENT fades into darkness. The OFFICE slowly comes into view, with LUCA pacing back and forth in the OFFICE. He matches the description perfectly. Ralph enters.)

RALPH. You ready, Luca?

LUCA. Si, Capo.

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RALPH. Let's go over the plan one final time...

LUCA. Ancora! We been through this cinquecento ... Like five hundred ...

RALPH. I don't want any mistakes, Luca.

LUCA. Lavoro facile, Capo. Just simple lawyer; no politico, no racer ... no senator or congressman.

RALPH. Luca, this job is very important. For me, for the company ... what's that noise? *(The hammering sound starts loudly and then slowly fades out.)*

LUCA. Chiasso? What noise?

RALPH. Don't you hear? It sounds like a woodpecker, or a hammer.

LUCA. No woodpecker, Capo. Mai visto- never seen in this city.

RALPH. Yeah. It's a city for ravens and vultures, and I like it that way, as long as I decide the pecking order. Anyway, where were we?

LUCA. Molto importante ... important job, Capo.

RALPH. Yes ... so, where do we start?

LUCA. I leave phone, pick up old sedan, and drive... viaggio.

RALPH. And you wear ...

LUCA. PPE ... full PPE, over mio lovely suits. White coverall, facemask, speciale face shield.

RALPH. Good, make sure you get the right face shield, Luca.

LUCA. Si, Capo, with buio glass, dark...

RALPH. And why is that important?

LUCA. Protetto da CCTV, only show mio person, nothing else.

RALPH. Good ... very good. See, I planned everything meticulously! What then?

LUCA. Then viaggio... Harold Smith's house.

RALPH. And reach there ...

LUCA. 9 pm. presile.

RALPH. Where will the lawyer be?

LUCA. Fuori outside ... walking dog.

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RALPH. Great. Then?

LUCA. I kill dog and lawyer, qualsiasi sequenza, unico knife or hands.

RALPH. With gloves!

LUCA. Si, Capo, PPE ... and no sound.

RALPH. Then?

LUCA. I leave lawyer's body, dog's body, viaggio and sparire... vanish.

RALPH. Don't remove your PPE, okay?

LUCA. Si, si, Capo. I keep PPE when drive.

RALPH. And where will you go?

LUCA. Continua US30 ad ovest. Then Tracey contatto me.

RALPH. Good, very good! Luca, I want to emphasize how important this job is. Harold Smith should not reach the court tomorrow morning.

LUCA. Si, Capo. Non lo fara, he not reach. You told molte times.

RALPH. Good! Anything else?

LUCA. Ragazza, Capo.

RALPH. Oh! The new girl?

LUCA. Si, Capo.

RALPH. Where is she?

LUCA. Fuori ... outside. Bring ragazza in?

RALPH. Please! Let's see what you've got for me.

LUCA. Oi, Sofi. *(Sofia enters in her skimpy clothes.)*

RALPH. Oh! She is a beauty! *(Ralph starts to circle around Sofia.)* Lovely figure! But can she... *(Ralph examines Sofia's hand.)* Oh, yes! She can! Strong biceps, rough fingers ... what can she do for me, Luca?

LUCA. *(Smiling)* Anything, Capo. Everything.

RALPH. *(Looking at Sofia)* Anything?

SOFIA. I live to serve, sir.

RALPH. Wow! That's a new tune. Did you teach her that, Luca?

SOFIA. I speak on my own, sir.

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RALPH. Hah! Good, very good. I like her, I already like her, and I don't even know her...

LUCA. She not buona, Capo. Ragazza need more training.

RALPH. Meaning?

LUCA. No buona with knife or gun.

RALPH. Not good with a knife or gun! Then what good will she be for me?

LUCA. Rope ... and veleno, strano veleno estraneo.

RALPH. Oh! Strange foreign poison, is that it Luca?

LUCA. Perfetta in city, Capo, no suono, no fuss.

RALPH. No sound, no fuss! Great ... great news ...

LUCA. (*Mischievous wink*) She do le cose with tongue, lingua meavigliosa.

RALPH. She has a marvelous tongue! (*Luca nods his head rapidly.*) Wonderful! Maybe, that's exactly what I need until she perfects her other skills.

LUCA. (*Completely taken aback*) You sleep with her, Capo? Voi?

RALPH. Why not?

LUCA. You never interested in tuo lavoratore ... subordinato ... your own people, Capo.

RALPH. Maybe, I'm changing. What's your name, darling?

SOFIA. Sofia, sir.

RALPH. You checked her, Luca?

LUCA. Completamente, Capo. Small-town ragazza, nuo records, nuo relatives, nuo gli amici. Sfuggita escaped.

RALPH. Escaped! From where?

SOFIA. Azerbaijan, sir.

RALPH. Another victim of another meaningless war, huh? And they call me a criminal.

LUCA. Tracey found ragazza in Chicago.

SOFIA. Not a good place for somebody like me, sir.

RALPH. (*Nodding*) Your English is quite good, Sofi.

SOFIA. My father was a librarian. He insisted that my sister and I learn English.

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RALPH. What happened to them?

SOFIA. Tortured and then brutally killed by the soldiers.

RALPH. I'm sorry. How did you survive in Chicago?

SOFIA. A strip club ... wasn't easy, sir. But I managed.

RALPH. You sure did! Nice collection, Luca. She's a survivor. Did Tracey approve?

LUCA. Si, Capo. Tracey done background checks herself.

RALPH. Good, very good. If Tracey approved, then there's nothing to worry about. I completely trust her judgment about our security measures. I wish I could say that about her choice of books.

LUCA. Non capisco, Capo. Books? Libreria?

RALPH. You see, Luca. Tracey loves fantasy, sci-fi, history, horror ... trashes only meant for scholars or children.

Unfortunately, sometimes, I am forced to read this or that based on her recommendations. Apparently, there are important leadership lessons. All powerful villains losing to cute little boys and girls, only because of love or destiny ... powerful political struggle in a faraway galaxy where people use ... well, I can only blame myself. I promised her that I would read anything she thought important for the job.

LUCA. You did?

RALPH. Yeah, to that scrawny, bespectacled bookworm...

LUCA. Si, si, Capo, mi ricordo ... remember...

RALPH. Anyway, enough about Tracey and her books. You ready, Luca?

LUCA. Completamente, Capo, nato pronto, born ready ...

RALPH. And ... you are not taking your cell phone, right?

LUCA. Si, Capo. Tracey take and gave me nuo.

RALPH. Great. Well, good luck, Luca. See you soon. Enjoy your vacation wherever Tracey sends you. And you, Sofi, *(Ralph holds Sofia's hands and whispers)* let's see what wonderful things you can do with your tongue. *(Ralph and Sofia exit.)*

LUCA. *(Shaking head)* Capo get old, Capo get worse, peggio.

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Capo never like this before, now Capo sleep with his lavoratore ... subordinato... now capo become micromanaging control-freak bastard! (*Mocking Ralph*) Let's go over the plan one final time... so Io ascoltare how smart me. He plans everything now, everywhere, with everybody. Volgio una birra, one beer, si, Capo decide where mio go. Devo fare pipi, Capo decide which bar go for loo. Comunque, non sono affari miei, not my business. Io uccido ... kill, get money, prendo I miei soldi. Vado alle Bahamas, Fiji, or Mauritius where Tracey send me. Povero Luca e la sua povera Sedan, poor us, here we go. Eccoci qui, viaggio, viaggio.

(The OFFICE plunges into darkness as the BASEMENT becomes visible.)

SOFIA. (*Reading*) “Dark suit, dark beard, and a dark heart, Cornelius was sent to accomplish a dark deed for his dark master. Alas! He never knew that destiny had other plans for him...”

MURPHY. “His dark sedan never reached Chicago where he was sent to kill Harold Smith, the plaintiff’s lawyer.” I know it by heart. I wrote it.

RALPH. And you gave a vivid description of Cornelius Luca, who had worked for me for a long time. His car was found in the middle of nowhere. We still don't know what happened. Do you, Ms. Murphy?

MURPHY. I've no idea what you're talking about!

RALPH. And yet, you perfectly described Luca, his dress, his car - and worse, his purpose.

MURPHY. I don't know what to say; it was just a story. And not a very good one either...

RALPH. A very descriptive story detailing our actions. I would have said that you followed us, saw Cornelius when he left our

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premises that night, pursued him, and did something to his car.

MURPHY. I... I...

RALPH. But there's a problem with this theory. When did the story come out, Sofia?

SOFIA. January 19, 2020, sir.

MURPHY. Yes. January 19, 2020. In Midwest Mirage, my first published story.

RALPH. When did you write the story, Ms. Murphy?

MURPHY. When did I ...

RALPH. Don't make me repeat myself. When did you write the story?

MURPHY. In 2019, took me a long time to finish. I was doing two jobs... trying to ...

RALPH. Yes, 2019. You couldn't have known anything anyway.

MURPHY. Known what?

RALPH. Our plans to eliminate Harold Smith. That was decided after January 17, when Smith finally agreed to be the lawyer.

MURPHY. Coincidence - I told you, just a mere coincidence.

RALPH. Coincidence indeed. But things took a fascinating turn that June ... June of 2020.

MURPHY. Oh! My first big break. My story "An unwanted guest" won the National Short Story Award. Now that's something I am proud of. The idea behind the story, you know, a bank manager dining alone in his home when an assassin emerged from the shadows...

RALPH. And they vanished!

MURPHY. That was a metaphor! The deeper message is ...

RALPH. What happened to Lydia, Ms. Murphy?

MURPHY. Who's Lydia? The assassin's name was McCormick.
(Ralph pours more wine; he is getting drunk.)

RALPH. Lydia McCormick was the second person we lost that year. She went to kill the banker and came back completely deranged. What happened to Lydia?

MURPHY. I don't know. How do I know?

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RALPH. Lydia was the second in command of my "negotiator" squad. *(Ralph air quotes negotiator.)*

MURPHY. Assassins, you mean? Mercenaries?

RALPH. How dare you! They are not mercenaries; they are mine. Mine through and through. I take care of them as my own, and they do the jobs that very few people are capable of.

MURPHY. Since when killing other humans become a job?

RALPH. Since always! Every big institution needs them. Every big country, every big ruler, and every single person in a position of power requires their service. You always need people to shut down your opposition's voice. To silence uncomfortable questions, terminate dangerous accusations, eliminate true competitors. And it takes a lot more than wanton killing. It's much more subtle, much more complex. There's a reason I call them "negotiators." And my Lydia was the best in her job. She was trained by Luca himself and became the head "negotiator" after Luca's disappearance.

MURPHY. What happened to your Lydia?

RALPH. That's what I want to find out. My Lydia, my hardcore trained negotiator, went to the banker's house ... and something happened in that house. Something strange, unexpected... something terrible...

(As Ralph speaks, the BASEMENT slowly fades into darkness, and the OFFICE becomes visible. Lydia is standing in front of the table, Tracey trying to control her.)

LYDIA. I can still see the eyes, oh the terrible eyes. They can see everything, every dark corner of my soul. They bore into my very existence. *(Lydia shrieks, holds her head, and stumbles.)*

TRACEY. Easy, Lydia, easy girl... *(Tracey eases Lydia into a chair. Ralph enters, the hammering sound starts loudly and then slowly fades out.)*

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RALPH. Oh, this damn noise! Are they still working, Tracey?

TRACEY. I don't think so, Mr. Jones. It's well past their working hours.

RALPH. The whole day! Feels like they are hammering inside my head.

TRACEY. Are you okay, Mr. Jones?

RALPH. Oh, I'm fine. It's just this noise. Anyway, as long as I get to play with the city, rule over what they build ... So? How did it go, Lydia?

LYDIA. I can feel the stars now ...

RALPH. You ... what?

LYDIA. I can see the air ... sweet sandal-scented fresh air that kisses the first dew on the lush green field. The eyes burnt all the darkness, and I can see everything now. *(Lydia shrieks, holds her head and falls.)*

RALPH. Lydia ... my girl ...

TRACEY. Easy ... easy ... *(Ralph and Tracey pull Lydia up and ease her into the chair.)*

RALPH. What is she talking about?

TRACEY. That's how we found her.

RALPH. What do you mean we found her! What happened to ... what's his name? The banker?

TRACEY. Singh, Imran Singh.

RALPH. Yes, what happened to him?

TRACEY. We didn't find any trace of him in the house.

RALPH. Oh! So, Lydia finished him.

TRACEY. We couldn't find the documents either.

RALPH. What?

TRACEY. Yes, Mr. Jones. Nothing ... no vouchers, no details of the accounts, no checks, no receipts, no transactions ... nothing.

RALPH. Did you check his computers? Maybe...

TRACEY. Everything. The IT guys couldn't find any trace of our files. Everything was wiped clean...

RALPH. That's good, right? If there's no evidence of our

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transactions, that means there's nothing to prove our involvement ...

TRACEY. Unless everything was transferred beforehand. We know Singh had all the documents with him. Somewhere in his computers, and the vouchers ...

RALPH. Lydia, Lydia- look at me! Look at me! Where are the papers? What did you do to Singh?

LYDIA. I did nothing ... the black spider ... it sits right at the center, far above the ground. She spins the gossamer yarn ... she tweaks a tiny knot here- boom, gone ... she tweaks another thread there ... vanish, another of the insects ... vanish ...

RALPH. What is she blabbering about?

TRACEY. She has been like this since we found her.

RALPH. She was supposed to meet you at ...

TRACEY. She wasn't there. We waited and waited ... but she didn't come. So, I went to check Singh's house. (*Ralph looks alarmed.*) Don't worry, Mr. Jones. I made sure not to leave any trace.

RALPH. What did you find there?

TRACEY. Nothing! Nobody was there, no paperwork, nothing. I checked as much as I could ...

RALPH. That was her job!

LYDIA. And I did my job.

RALPH. What? Lydia! What did you say?

LYDIA. I did my job. I cleaned my room, washed my coats ...

TRACEY. I found her in Singh's backward. Completely naked, sitting in darkness, in front of the rosebushes.

LYDIA. Naked! Oh! So cold! The eyes burnt my clothes, cleansed my soul, the spider has eight eyes.

RALPH. What's this spider she keeps talking about? (*Tracey shrugs.*) What happened to Singh's wife? The servants? And his two children? Lydia was supposed to take care of them, right? I planned everything, Tracey.

TRACEY. There was nobody in the house, Mr. Jones. Not a single living soul. Something happened there. Something

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terrible ...

RALPH. What terrible thing can make *Lydia* like this? How's this even possible?

TRACEY. Something creepy! Something nasty, horrible.

RALPH. Tracey, this is Lydia. Her entire childhood was a horror story, more horrible than any of the trash you read or watch on TV. She experienced more grotesque, macabre events ... for crying out loud, she caused more bloody horrors as a child than all your movie slashers combined!

TRACEY. And yet, she is physically unharmed, and mentally completely gone! Something happened, Mr. Jones, something happened in that house...

RALPH. And we will find out what happened ... we will find them, and when we do ...

TRACEY. What do you want me to do with her, Mr. Jones?

RALPH. What do you mean? Find a doctor, the very best. Don't worry about the money. Just make sure she gets the best treatment available.

TRACEY. I am sorry, but as your counterintelligence head, I will strongly advise against that.

RALPH. What are you talking about?

TRACEY. She was an asset, I agree, but we have no idea what happened to her. Or worse, what she had done. Who she'd talked to, what she talked about, what she revealed. When you put her in somebody's care, even if under our surveillance, there is no way to know what she would do. I am afraid she had already done something that we might find very difficult to conceal and repair.

RALPH. What do you suggest?

TRACEY. (*Shrugging, slowly but deliberately*) Eliminate her, remove all evidence of her existence. Make sure nobody can connect her with you...

RALPH. No. Never.

TRACEY. It might be the best course of action, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. No, Tracey. I am not some megalomaniac politician

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who uses people for their own agenda and then discards them like toilet paper. I take care of my own, always. *(Ralph strokes Lydia's hair. Lydia, still sitting on the chair, embraces Ralph like a child.)*

LYDIA. Please, don't let the eyes see me again. Please don't leave me with the spider...

RALPH. Easy, baby, easy. I will not leave you.

TRACEY. I am afraid your love and affection for her are blinding your judgment, Mr. Jones. It's not good for business.

RALPH. I don't care, Tracey. I will not build my business on the blood and bones of my own. You tell me. If something like this happens to you tomorrow, what would you like me to do? What would you recommend then?

TRACEY. As a negotiator, I would pray to get a boss like you, forever. But as your chief of counterintelligence, I would recommend the same- remove me if I ever become a threat to the organization.

RALPH. No, Tracey. Killing people ... is bad business. Killing your own... is bad principle, and I never stray from my principles. I take care of people who fight for me, serve me, and are willing to do everything for me.

TRACEY. But at the end of the day, we are just ... us, people. People can easily be replaced, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. You are not the spare parts of a car. You are humans, you are people raised by me...

TRACEY. Housed, fed, and clothed by you, trained by you ... and we all work to repay that debt.

RALPH. There's no debt. You do work for me, I pay you...

TRACEY. Workers can be replaced, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. Family can't. You are not a worker. In thirteen years, I thought I managed to make that clear... *(Ralph slowly caresses Tracey's cheek)* People don't throw a graduation party for a worker, and then bring only three guests and boxes upon boxes of dark chocolates with raspberry flavor for dinner...

TRACEY. *(Her eyes moisten, she strokes Lydia's hair.)* Three

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guests and this kitty, who finished almost all those chocolates...

RALPH. Or leave important business meetings, fly five hundred miles to attend a worker's PhD ceremony...

TRACEY. *(Crying)* Only to realize that it's not the correct date ... *(Embracing Lydia)* Somebody mixed up between a three and an eight ...

RALPH. *(Stroking Lydia's hair)* I don't know who taught her numbers, did you, Tracey? *(Tracey nods, still crying. Ralph hugs Lydia, who's still whimpering)* People don't hug a worker in the middle of a gang war in a whorehouse... bullets flying, knives flashing ... a bundle of bones and skins, starved, raw, untrusting, tired of the world, a child who has killed multiple times, not because she wants to but just to survive...

TRACEY. And gave her a home- and love her like his own...

RALPH. You're my family, Tracey, and family stays together. We don't kill each other ... though sometimes we feel like tearing into each other. *(Tracey smiles.)* It took me a long time to bring you all together, and for the first time in my life, I got a family ... a family that I'm proud of, a family I love and would die for. Whatever might happen in the future, I will not let my family scatter again. No more of this elimination talk, you understand?

TRACEY. Yes, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. Good girl. *(Ralph hugs Tracey.)* Now, find her somebody really good, my counterintelligence head. And try to be as discreet as you can.

TRACEY. I will, Mr. Jones. *(Ralph begins to leave as Tracey helps Lydia stand up. Ralph turns back.)*

RALPH. *(In a dangerous menacing voice)* And Tracey, make sure you find out what happened in that house. Who did this to her.

TRACEY. I will, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. As soon as you can. Devote as much money and manpower you can spare. This should take precedence over all other secondary jobs and non-essential targets for now.

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TRACEY. Yes, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. And for once, forget your trashy books and magazines. No more magic, or cute little toys in faraway galaxies. I want you to completely focus on this. I'm not joking, Tracey.

TRACEY. I understand. I will. *(Ralph nods and leaves. As Tracey helps Lydia walk out, Lydia stops and kisses Tracey on her forehead.)*

LYDIA. *(Whispering in a strange tone)* You are not safe here.

TRACEY. *(Shuddering)* Lydia ...my girl, what are you talking about?

LYDIA. Nobody is safe anywhere. The spider told me. She can see everybody; she can hear everything.

TRACEY. It's okay, girl... everything's fine, you will be fine. These are just happening inside your head...

LYDIA. I know ... everything's happening inside my head ... that's what makes them so terrifying. The spider can see inside your head. The spider has eight eyes. Beware of the spider ... beware of the spider, everybody, beware of the spider.

(The OFFICE plunges into darkness as the action shifts to the BASEMENT.)

RALPH. What happened to Lydia, Ms. Murphy? What happened to her?

MURPHY. I don't know. How do I know?

RALPH. Yes, of course. How would you know? After all, your story came out on June 15, right? *(Murphy nods.)* We lost Lydia on June 16. She went to the banker's house, and the original Lydia never came back; she completely lost her mind. And till today, we haven't found the banker.

SOFIA. The official statement issued by the bank, sir, was that Imran Singh had to go back to his country to attend an urgent

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family matter.

MURPHY. According to my story, McCormick and the banker came to an agreement and ...

RALPH. Utter rubbish. Lydia was a trained negotiator. She would not come to an agreement with her target. What did you do to her?

MURPHY. I ... I wasn't even in Philly during that June.

RALPH. I brought in the very best neurologists and neuroscientists from all over the world. Nobody could do anything; she is still the same. What did you do to her?

(Murphy doesn't say anything. Ralph extends the glass to Sofia, who pours more wine.) I doubt you had the physical capacity to do anything to Lydia. Let me ask you something. How long does it take for you to write these stories?

MURPHY. Almost six months, maybe more. I used to work multiple jobs. Writing was sort of a hobby for me. But now that I am devoting ...

RALPH. Six months! She says six months! She takes as much time to write as I take to formulate the plans. So, this story about Lydia ... it came out in June, right? *(Murphy nods.)* And you started around ... January?

MURPHY. Christmas.

RALPH. Christmas!

MURPHY. I distinctly remember. It was Christmas eve. It snowed a lot. There were only a few people at Mary's Diner. We were going to close for the night when a couple walked in. The man was limping. They ordered coffee and nothing else. I was wondering why anybody would come to Mary's Diner on Christmas eve and just order coffee. Anyway, when I delivered the coffee, the man thanked me, and the woman whispered, "I can feel the stars now ..."

RALPH. What did the woman say?

MURPHY. "I can feel the stars now." Of course, she meant the warmth of the coffee on that cold night, but it was a curious description to say the least, and it gave me a strange

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idea. I came back home and started writing ... took me a long time to finish, though. But that's how the story about the banker and the assassin developed.

RALPH. So, you started the story around Christmas. Sofi, do you know when I first mentioned our plan to Tracey?

SOFIA. January 23rd, according to Tracey's logbook. That's the first time you mentioned about erasing the documents from the banker's possession.

RALPH. So, on January 23rd, I had the idea of removing these documents. I didn't have any plan then, just the idea that we needed to erase all the documents. But by December 24th, you already got this strange idea about your story. (*Murphy nods.*) For the next six months, I formulated the plan. A solid, concrete plan. I worked through every minor detail, smoothed out every little kink. And you, Ms. Murphy, you proceeded with your story. I worked here, right in the capital of the country, unknown to your existence. And you continued your miserable life somewhere in the Midwest, where you worked on the story. You are telling me that you had no knowledge of my plan, no insider information about our intended course of action ... and yet ... things collided. Your story was published the day before I sent Lydia to the banker's house. Why? It's in your story. What were we going to do? You wrote that already. How were we doing it? What about the collateral damage? How to salvage the situation ... you wrote everything. Can you see the problem, Ms. Murphy?

SOFIA. Somehow, you were "divining" our plans ...

RALPH. *My* plans. Plans that only *I* have in my head, plans that nobody else knows about. And yet, you not only knew about those, but you were also writing about all the intricate details. Most people would even say that we're following your ideas.

MURPHY. Just mere chance. I'm telling you ...

RALPH. That possibility disappeared, evaporated, vanished after your Total Confrontation came out.

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MURPHY. Ah, my first urban fantasy... The teen angels, guns, monsters ... and love, all in the backdrop of a remote mountain village.

RALPH. We spent an enormous amount of time scouting that remote mountain village, Ms. Murphy. It was an easy target, a remote location far from any major city. Small local high school, tiny community college, quiet neighborhood. The ideal place to set up our drug factory disguised as a medicine plant. There were no teen angels ... no guns. And yet ... our entire factory was wiped out overnight.

(The BASEMENT slowly fades into darkness as the OFFICE becomes visible. Tracey is standing in front of the table. Ralph, furious, is pacing back and forth.)

RALPH. Damn! Damn! Damn! What the hell is going on, Tracey? How's this even possible?

TRACEY. The police said it was a gang war regarding drug dealing.

RALPH. Bullshit ... there was only one gang, and that's mine. Somebody's trying to ruin us. First, Luca disappeared, then my Lydia lost her mind and now an entire factory is just wiped out. I am telling you, Tracey, there's somebody behind all this and we need to find out who they are. How they are doing this.

TRACEY. Yes, I think there's somebody, but that *how* is the problem!

RALPH. You have something in mind? Do you have a lead?

TRACEY. I don't know if I would call it a lead.

RALPH. Damn, Tracey! Then why bring it up? We don't have time to play games. Our people are dying, somebody's trying to bring us down ... maybe, that Chicago drug cartel...

TRACEY. *(Coming to a decision)* No. I think you should see this, even though I don't know what is going on. Yes, you

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should definitely see this.

RALPH. What are you talking about?

TRACEY. There's something I need to show you. I am afraid I have already wasted too much time. Sofi, please bring the binder. *(Sofia enters with a large binder. Tracey starts to rummage through the content.)*

RALPH. What is this?

TRACEY. Found it, here. *(Tracey hands over an old magazine to Ralph.)*

RALPH. Midwest Mirage! Is this another of your leadership lessons? Tracey, we don't have time for this.

TRACEY. Sofi showed it to me. Apparently, she shares my love for offbeat fantasy stories.

SOFIA. It's a small magazine. But I like what they publish, sir.

RALPH. And we want to know this, because ...

TRACEY. This was our first lead, though I didn't realize the importance until recently.

RALPH. You are not making any sense. What's in this magazine? *(Tracey takes the magazine from Ralph, finds a particular page, and gives it to Sofia.)*

TRACEY. Sofi, will you please read that section while I find the next story?

RALPH. What the ...

TRACEY. Please, Mr. Jones. This is important. Perhaps the most important lead we have in this whole mess. *(Ralph shrugs.)*

RALPH. Okay, let's get on with this.

SOFIA. "Dark suit, dark beard, and a dark heart, Cornelius was sent to accomplish a dark deed for his dark master. Alas! He never knew that destiny had other plans. His dark sedan never reached Chicago where he was sent to kill Harold Smith, the plaintiff's lawyer."

RALPH. What the...! That's Luca. Who wrote this? When?

TRACEY. It's written by somebody called Murphy.

RALPH. Murphy what?

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TRACEY. Just Murphy.

RALPH. Why didn't you tell this before? Clearly, this is the best evidence ... somebody's following us. Who is this Murphy? Where does...

TRACEY. Except, there is a big problem.

RALPH. What problem? I don't see...

TRACEY. The story ... though a very accurate description of our plans and actions ... came out before Luca went to assassinate Smith.

RALPH. (*Disappointed*) Oh! I see! So, it can't be related, right?

TRACEY. That's what I thought. Even though it gave a very detailed description of Luca, his purpose, his plans to eliminate the lawyer ...

RALPH. Did it mention what happened to him?

TRACEY. In a very vague, non-specific way.

RALPH. Meaning?

TRACEY. Sofi ... the last page, please, the paragraph highlighted in yellow.

SOFIA. "Confined to the depth of the abyss, incinerated by the eternal flames of the Flower, Cornelius suffered the horrible pain he always avoided inflicting on his innocent victims. But destiny was punishing him for somebody else's crimes, his Capo's. As a shadow disappears in the dark depth of the night, Cornelius disappeared in flames, never to be seen or heard in the land of the living. His final thought was ..."

RALPH. What the devil is the eternal flames of the Flower?

TRACEY. No idea. Just some poetic way to say he was burnt, I guess.

RALPH. Was he?

TRACEY. I don't know, Mr. Jones. We found the car, no fingerprints, no evidence of an accident, and of course, no evidence of a fire. I would be very surprised if it was fire...

RALPH. Rubbish, plain simple trash. There's nothing for us in it, Tracey. Let's focus on finding some real evidence ...

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TRACEY. Then came "An unwanted guest," written by this same author, Murphy. And this story actually won a national award which Murphy accepted. We have her picture here...

RALPH. Do we need to care about this Murphy? Clearly, she wrote a story that had a character resembling Luca, but it was pure coincidence. The story was published before I sent Luca to the lawyer's house. End of the discussion. Why are you dragging this Murphy and her writing career ...

TRACEY. Because "An unwanted guest" uncannily, unerringly, and quite creepily talked about Lydia and what happened to her.

RALPH. What the ...! When was this?

TRACEY. June, June fifteenth 2020, to be precise.

RALPH. When did Lydia go to the banker's house?

TRACEY. June sixteenth, the very next day.

RALPH. How long does it take to write these stories, Tracey?

TRACEY. I have no idea, Mr. Jones. Never tried any myself. But my guess would be at least a few weeks.

SOFIA. Months ... at least a few months.

RALPH. You wrote stories, Sofi?

SOFIA. Just one, sir, when I was in high school. Takes too much time and effort to develop characters, build the world. Submitted to a local magazine, of course, they rejected it ... but it took another three months for the decision to come.

TRACEY. Indeed. I had insider information from the organization that sponsored this national competition. Murphy's story was submitted in the first week of March.

RALPH. No, not possible. We didn't even know that the documents existed until late April, right? (*Tracey nods.*) Then we formed the plans, the logistics ...

SOFIA. A submission in March means she must have started writing it around October- November, if not earlier.

RALPH. Then I don't understand how any of these things are possible. What did she write anyway?

TRACEY. I found it unsettling, to say the least ... (*Tracey*

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finds another magazine, opens a page she had marked previously, and starts reading.) "the black spider ... it sits right at the center, far above the ground. She spins the gossamer yarn ... she tweaks a tiny knot here- boom, gone ... she tweaks another thread there ... vanish, another of the insects ... vanish" whispered the assassin.

"You can see the spiders too?" asked the banker.

"I can see the air ..." McCormick replied, "sweet sandal-scented fresh air that kisses the first dew on the lush green field. The eyes burnt all the darkness, and I can see everything now."

RALPH. Lydia- that's what Lydia was saying! How? How is this even possible? A story submitted in March ... written the year before ... and it wrote everything Lydia said! How in the name of ...

SOFIA. Did Lydia read the story? I know it's unlikely, but still...

TRACEY. An excellent point ...

RALPH. Did Lydia read the story, Tracey?

TRACEY. Of course not, Mr. Jones. The story came out on June 15th, just the day before her assignment. Lydia spent the whole day in solitary confinement, first with the psychologists, then in the meditation room. I personally administered the drugs to prepare her ...

SOFIA. Do you always prepare people like this for an assignment?

TRACEY. Not always, but this was a special case. Lydia was going to work on an entire family, including kids and servants ... it requires a special kind of mindset ...

SOFIA. (*Reminiscing*) I saw people like this during the war ... humans who lost their mind, lost any semblance of humanity. They brutally torture, they kill, they get enormous pleasure from inflicting pain on other humans...

RALPH. My dear Sofi, let me assure you that Lydia was not one of those brutes. The people you are talking about were

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serving monsters, and they became monsters themselves. Lydia was mine. Nobody under my command would cause unnecessary pain, most of all, not Lydia.

SOFIA. Whoever is in a position of power abuses power, sir. I saw it in my country, I saw it here. I saw it in the battlefields, in the streets, in the bar, strip club ... it's always the same. Why would Lydia be any different?

RALPH. Because Lydia was mine. Raised by me, trained by me, commanded by me. I know you had a hard life, Sofi. I can only imagine what war does to a country and its citizens. What people feel when they see their own family brutally tortured and murdered in front of their eyes. But Lydia's life wasn't easy either. Lydia killed her uncle when she was seven ... with a pair of scissors. And the next few years were no different. When I found her, she was a wreck, a shell of a human, a scared urchin surviving in the bowels of our famous city.

SOFIA. You found her?

RALPH. Of course, I did. Turned out, that's what I do, that's what I'm really good at. I found Tracey, Helena, Rudolph, and many others. I took them in, fed them, educated them, tried to give them a new life...

SOFIA. You trained them how to kill!

RALPH. I trained them how to survive. I made sure they never inflicted on others what they'd suffered. I trained them to be professionals. For Lydia, it meant creating an assassin because that's what she has been for her entire life. That's what she knew the best. For Tracey, it meant sending her to an Ivy League school where she would ...

SOFIA. You exploited them, made them your slaves...

RALPH. I utilized their talent. Please, don't ever tell me that my people are my slaves or servants. Whoever works for me does it because they want to, not because I forced them to. When was the last time I made you do something for me? When did I say, Sofi, do this ... or else ...

SOFIA. What about Cornelius? He loved to torture ...

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RALPH. Luca can be ... could be... rough, especially in bed. I heard that complaint before. Another example of a bad childhood. But I am glad I found him, and we continued our journey together, even though we had our disagreement...

SOFIA. You collect people ... you collect as if we are trophies, then you use them for your own benefit ... *(Sofia suddenly stops. She remembers something; she had this exact conversation before, but with somebody completely different.)*

RALPH. People collect coins, jewelry, cars, watches- waste money on worthless things. I collect people, I give their life a new meaning, and in turn, they help me. Anyway, why are you suddenly so interested in these? Why does Lydia or Cornelius's past matter to you?

TRACEY. I am sorry, Mr. Jones. I asked Sofi to read all these stories to see what she thinks. Clearly, she took them very seriously.

RALPH. What else is in these stories, Tracey, that made such an impression on her?

TRACEY. I ... I don't know if you would like to hear that, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. C'mon, Tracey. Let's call a spade a spade. What's in there?

TRACEY. How a demon built his empire. How he forced his slaves to do his bidding, created these monster assassins, planned murders, devised schemes to cause mayhem...

RALPH. *(Mock hurt)* Ouch! I'm the demon, right?

TRACEY. I'm sorry, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. Why? You didn't write these. *(After a brief pause)* The stories are pretty accurate, I presume? Otherwise, Sofi wouldn't be so moved, would she?

TRACEY. Not just accurate. Uncanny would be the word, Mr. Jones. Under the pretense of allegory and thinly veiled metaphors, the stories describe our exact plans and operations. Each of these stories explores different persons. The Stargazer was about Luca, An Unwanted Guest tells Lydia's story, and

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this Total confrontation is an overview of our entire operation in the mountains. As the stories were published before we took any action, any outsider will believe that this author is laying out a plan, and we are following it to the T. I don't know how she can be so accurate...

RALPH. What's her name again?

TRACEY. Murphy ... here, we have her picture. This is after winning the national story writing competition. *(Tracey hands the picture to Ralph.)*

RALPH. This! She is a gimp! She can barely walk! She cannot do this on her own, I am telling you, Tracey. There must be somebody inside feeding her all the intel.

TRACEY. So far, we got nothing. And, if you ask me, it's almost impossible. The only person who knew about all the operations was you. And then, me, by extension.

RALPH. Once, I am okay... it's just by chance. Twice- I still can understand, mere luck, funny coincidence. But three times ... three times ... It's impossible. Nobody without inside information can write things so accurately. But how? How can she write things that are yet to come? Plans that I am yet to formulate?

TRACEY. I'm not sure. I don't know how it's possible, yet it's happening, it's happened three times and ...

RALPH. And there's no way to say that it wouldn't happen again. There is something there and we need to find it out whatever it is.

TRACEY. How do you want me to proceed, Mr. Jones?

RALPH. Start 24-hour surveillance, put all projects on hold. Put all your resources, dig everything out about her past. See if you can find any connections. Anybody in my company even remotely connected to her ...

TRACEY. What about the gas project?

RALPH. Ah! We cannot put it on hold, can we?

TRACEY. I mean, for a few weeks, maybe a month or two at most. But more than that, and the chairman might arrive in the

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country and negotiate a new deal.

RALPH. No, never! The chairman must not be allowed to see the president. How frequently does this Murphy publish her stories, Tracey?

TRACEY. Every eight months ... maybe a year. There are only three stories in two years, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. And when did the last one come out?

TRACEY. Her Total Confrontation came out last month, to be precise, October twelfth.

RALPH. Seriously? No ... this can't be a coincidence. The day we produced our first batch of drugs was the day she published her book.

TRACEY. Novella, not exactly a book. But I agree, it's too much of a coincidence.

RALPH. At this rate, it would take at least six months before the next story comes out, right?

TRACEY. It will be too risky to wait that long.

RALPH. Yes, but at least we can wait a couple of months, can't we?

TRACEY. I think so.

RALPH. Okay ... let's stop everything and wait. And in the meantime, find whatever you can about this Murphy.

TRACEY. Yes, Mr. Jones.

RALPH. And Tracey ... thank you! I yelled at you during your undergraduate, during your PhD ... whenever I saw you with one of those books. I never thought your habit of reading trash would come in handy ...

TRACEY. Books are never trash, Mr. Jones. They can be good or not so good. But you always learn something from each one, books have great power.

RALPH. That's what I realize. Let's see if we can nab the gimp behind these stories. A gimp, of all people, a crippled woman ... Luca vanished, Lydia lost her mind ... and now an entire company of trained commandos is dead, a factory full of drugs ... gone! And who is behind this! A crippled, paralyzed woman

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... needs support to walk ... how ironic! I can't believe ... I just can't believe this ... (*Ralph leaves.*)

SOFIA. You have a PhD?

TRACEY. In economics, yes. I also have an MBA...

SOFIA. Why are you doing this?

TRACEY. Doing what?

SOFIA. Why are you working for this criminal? He builds drug factories, kills people, utilizes gas shortage, or even manufactures similar problems to fill up his purse ... there isn't an ounce of good in that man ...

TRACEY. And yet, here we are.

SOFIA. What do you mean?

TRACEY. Luca ... Lydia ... you ... me ... and many others you call friends or even an acquaintance in this building would not have survived without him.

SOFIA. He is a vile person ... a villain ... a demon...

TRACEY. (*Laughs*) There are no heroes in the world, Sofi. Only in books. You escape in those worlds and find great heroes, valiant warriors, brilliant sorcerers. Then you come back and see that there is only evil and *more evil* in this world. So, when your time comes, you choose the lesser evil and try your best to protect the people you love from the greater evil.

SOFIA. Is that what they teach you in your PhD?

TRACEY. I learned it from Mr. Jones.

SOFIA. How can you support him? How can you blindly follow him? We just talked about a drug factory. A fucking drug factory near a village! Do you know what that means to the kids? To the people in the entire ...

TRACEY. There is another half of the story, Sofi.

SOFIA. And that is?

TRACEY. Alex was already moving in with his gang.

SOFIA. Who is Alex?

TRACEY. The boss of the Chicago drug cartel. Haven't you heard of him? You are from Midwest, no?

SOFIA. Never heard of any Alex.

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TRACEY. He goes by the name Scorpion.

SOFIA. Scorpion! The Scorpion? (*Tracey nods, Sofia looks pale.*)

TRACEY. See, even you know him. Not personally, but by reputation, right? I would be surprised if somebody who spent six months in a strip club in Chicago didn't recognize the Scorpion.

SOFIA. But he is in Chicago ... not here, this is the east coast ... this is ...

TRACEY. Alex has been trying to expand his empire in this part of the country. If we didn't do what we have done, it would be Alex's cartel building a factory somewhere there instead of us. And you know what it means to have Alex's factory in an area, don't you? (*Sofia slowly nods.*) And now that our's is wiped clean, he will try again.

SOFIA. So, your Mr. Jones built a drug factory to protect people, did he?

TRACEY. He built a drug factory to protect and maintain his territory, to do business, and his business would be the lesser evil, by a wide margin, compared to the Scorpion's.

SOFIA. So, he is a hero?

TRACEY. What did I just tell you, Sofi? There are no heroes in this world. He is just what he is.

SOFIA. And what's that?

TRACEY. A very shrewd but unique, businessman.

SOFIA. Why unique?

TRACEY. Because he is a businessman who takes care of his own. He might be many things, but he is not a liar, or a deceiver, at least never to people who follow him. He does everything for the people who work for him, and in my thirteen years with him, I have never seen him betray his own. Never.

SOFIA. He sent Lydia to kill an innocent family, a family with two children...

TRACEY. Who said about killing children? Don't you see the

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problems? Lydia was going to eliminate the banker, even the servants, if necessary, then take the documents and...

SOFIA. And kill the wife and children.

TRACEY. And make his wife and children vanish.

SOFIA. Vanish! This is not a world of wizards and sorcerers.

TRACEY. Lydia's job was to bring the wife and children to me, of course, after making sure they were not conscious. My job was to make sure that they didn't recall anything ... and then have a life.

SOFIA. Lydia wasn't going to kill them, are you sure?

TRACEY. Not if she could avoid it. Sometimes, it cannot be avoided, but Mr. Jones abhors killing children. Sofi, would any of us be here today if he decided to kill people, especially children, simply because they come in his way? The banker was the enemy, not his family. And if you ask Mr. Jones, he would merely say it's lousy business killing people. And I sort of like that explanation. Who knows, maybe he had plans for the children. But we never found any trace of them, not the banker, not his wife or children. We still don't know what happened in that house. What happened to Lydia.

SOFIA. Lydia was his pet.

TRACEY. As are you, and I. And he loves us; his pets are all he has. And his business runs through his pets. Someday, you will be the one to take this mantle. Don't worry; he will train you as he trained Lydia for the job and Luca before him. And me too.

SOFIA. Did he have sex with you as well?

TRACEY. He what!?

SOFIA. He's a maniac! A sex freak. He makes me do things that ...

TRACEY. He had sex with you!?

SOFIA. Has ... still does, every day ... gets worse and worse. And then he says... (*mocking*) When was the last time I made you do something for me? When did I say, Sofi, do this ... or else ... Hypocrite! Megalomaniac ...

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TRACEY. How's it even possible! He never sleeps with his ... subordinates, never.

SOFIA. Are you kidding me? Lydia ... you ...

TRACEY. Lydia was almost like his daughter, Sofi. And I ... I was...

SOFIA. Why don't you run away, Tracey? You have a PhD. Why don't you just leave and ...

TRACEY. And go where? He's the only person who's ever treated me as a human, not a piece of meat.

SOFIA. Coming from you, that's a very curious description.

TRACEY. Yeah. A PhD, an MBA from an Ivy league university ... polished, intelligent, sophisticated me. My mother sold me to a human trafficker when I was six, they sold me to a brothel when I was nine. I've been nothing but a timid piece of meat...scared, afraid, obedient... I didn't even have the courage to kill myself, even though I contemplated it every night ... and I was like that until Mr. Jones rescued me from that hell. Why do you think I escape into fantasy worlds?

SOFIA. Oh, Tracey! I'm so sorry.

TRACEY. That's my past, that I cannot change. But I vow to do my best to help Mr. Jones, to make sure that the world doesn't make another Tracey, or Lydia. Oh, her story might be worse, if you can believe me, Sofi. It took an enormous time and love from Mr. Jones to make her right again. I feel proud to be of some help, too.

SOFIA. You- I understand. But ... Love! Mr. Jones?

TRACEY. You'll be surprised. Beneath that exterior, there is so much tenderness and love there. That's how Lydia recovered. He would literally guard her with his life. No wonder he was so shaken and angry with what happened to Lydia. Mr. Jones really loves that girl as her own daughter. Sofi, he loves everybody he calls his own.

SOFIA. And what about you? Do you love him as your own, Tracey?

TRACEY. It's not just love. You don't feel love when you go

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through what we'd been through. For us ... me ... he provided a safe place where I could sleep peacefully; believe me, it took me a long time to realize that I was safe there. But more than a place, he gave me people ... he brought Lydia ... Luca was there too, then Helen, Rudolph ... and one fine day, without realizing, without ever consciously thinking about it ... I woke up, and realized it's my home. The people ... Mr. Jones ... transformed the safety of four walls and a roof into a cozy place I could call home. And that's what made all the difference. You asked me why I don't run away. Because it's my home, and Mr. Jones is my family. Lydia is my family. And I'd never leave my family behind, whatever happens.

SOFIA. You ... you really feel like he's your family?

TRACEY. Much more than any of my biological family ever was. That's why I'm so surprised to hear that he's sleeping with you ... but then, unlike you, we all came at a very young age ... maybe he's changing ... he's getting old ... his needs are different now. He's definitely changed at least in the last couple of years.

SOFIA. How so?

TRACEY. I can't articulate, but I've known him for a long time. He is becoming more controlling. He used to just frame the idea and let me take care of the details. Now, he is getting involved in every tiny detail, micromanaging everything. Maybe it's an age-related thing. But believe me, Sofi, when he gets the throne, he will make a better world; he surely will.

SOFIA. Throne! I thought he isn't interested in politics.

TRACEY. Oh, he isn't. Not this daily bickering, backstabbing, deceiving election-oriented politics. But he is very much interested in power, and he is becoming the power behind the throne, the modern kingmaker, Sofi. But enough about him. Now we need to get back to work and see what this Murphy is all about. You don't know her, do you?

SOFIA. I ... no, I am sorry. She is a writer ... we never were part of the same sphere.

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TRACEY. Yeah, I guess so. Let's go and dig her up.

(The OFFICE plunges into darkness as the action shifts to the BASEMENT.)

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