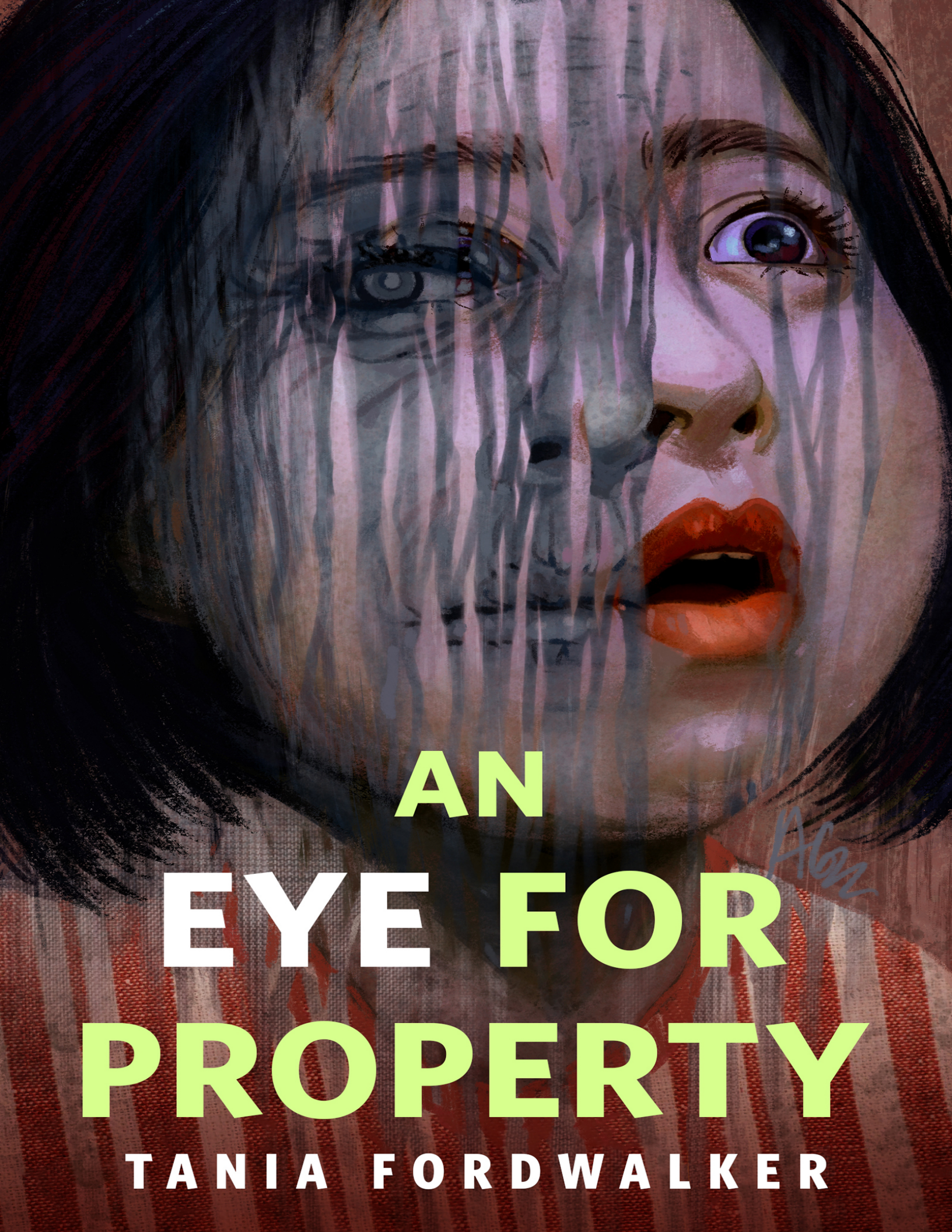

AN
EYE FOR
PROPERTY
TANIA FORDWALKER

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Illustration by ADDISON GREEN

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YOU

You are awake throughout the brain surgery, and by the end of it, so am I—and that means something went wrong. Or right, depending on your point of view.

The Tec who monitored the robotic arm during the insertion straddles a high stool, jabbing at a tablet, skinny face slack with boredom. You glimpse the edge of a tattoo peeking from the sleeve of his lab coat: the tip of a surfboard. He rattles through the list of questions without looking at you: *How many fingers, any nausea*, the usual tedium. *Your name?*

"Mabel Yang." Your throat is dry, but you don't ask for water.

"And where are we?"

"Splice of Life." You stare at the greenery wall beyond the glass cleanroom. This is a room-within-a-room—appropriate, considering the procedure you just underwent. The plants sprouting from the wall form the Splice of Life logo, a flipped yin-yang symbol without the dots, the divide between the halves tracing the shape of an *S*. Some of the more delicate ferns are browning.

"What year is it?"

"It's 2039." You touch the small bandage on your right temple, where your skin is still rubbery-numb from the local anaesthetic. "So it's—*she's*—in there?"

"The chip is linking to your neural pathways as we speak."

My sight was upside down to begin with, but has corrected itself. Every leaf in the logo is so crisp, even without glasses. Remarkable. I chose you for, among other things, your 20/20 vision. Now touch is coming to me too: ghostly shimmers in your extremities, the prickling of bloodless limbs waking—my chip probing tiny electronic feelers along your neural pathways, colonising you. Your bare thigh is sticking to the faux-leather surface of the MedBed. I feel it all.

"I guess I'm a cyborg now. Or *she* is, anyway." Your lips quirk—a smile, or a grimace, I can't say: It's not as though I can see your face from inside it.

“Mm.” The Tec flicks to a new screen. “You’re aware you’re in the cooling-off period? That, until we activate your Passenger for her diagnostic test, you still have the right to change your mind?”

You tap the bandage over the tiny hole in your head. “Feeling pretty committed.”

“Right.” He scans the screen. “Before I trigger the handover test, let’s run through the agreement you signed.” He clears his throat and rattles off, “Modified boilerplate Driver contract with accommodation clause. Initial contract is for a year, to be renewed to permanent employment if both Driver and Passenger are satisfied. For the duration of the initial contract: Driver agrees to preclude pregnancy and refrain from further body modifications (see Appendix A); Passenger agrees to refrain from sexual intercourse and any additional body modifications, and refrain from consuming lactose. Extras to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis: interstate and international travel, hazardous activities (see Appendix B), adjustments to schedule for special events, et cetera. Percentage of Passenger contributions to Driver’s medical and dental detailed in Appendix C.”

You’ve been nodding this whole time, head bobbling like an inane dashboard toy.

“You’ve signed on for two days per week: Fridays and Saturdays, nine AM to nine PM, with the option to renegotiate after a three-month trial. You’re aware that you’re expected to make the commute *on your own time*,” he emphasises this, “to your Passenger’s gate at the address listed in appendix C, and that you’re to be there a minimum of five minutes before handover?”

Bobble bobble.

“You’ve inspected the accommodation provided by the Driver that forms part of your payment?”

“Yep.” You pause. “I mean, it’s more of a shack than a house … but have you tried to find a rental lately?”

“Sure. It sucks,” he says flatly, and pushes on. “You can choose to withdraw from your contract at any time during the three-month trial

period, but you'll have to repay half the hiring bonus to cover the magnetic chip wipe and, of course, relinquish the accommodation."

"Got it." Your throat is so dry it clicks when you swallow. "Uh, can I please have—"

"App's installed." He hands over your sleek glass phone. "It'll chime a reminder fifteen minutes before handover, then there's a two-minute warning siren. The siren is *loud*. That's a safety feature to give you time to prepare. You don't want your Passenger to wake up and find themself behind the wheel of a car in the fast lane. Your job is to give your Passenger the best experience you can offer."

You lick your cracked lips. "What if there's a … problem? With the Passenger?"

"That's what the app is for. If she fails to leave your body in good condition, register a low-starred review. Should the rating average fall under a certain threshold on either side, we'll call you both in for mediation."

"Well," you murmur, "guess it won't be hard to get us in the same room."

The Tec checks his watch again. "Let's wake her up."

"Sure," you say. "Is there a countdown, or—"

ME

I blink. Not you. *Me. You* are gone, and I'm in control.

"Ma'am?" The Tec flashes a penlight into my eyes. "Rose?"

"The rumours of my demise were greatly exaggerated."

He smiles. "No disorientation then, Rose?" His tone is obsequious, gentle. He can tell the difference between staff and customer, and knows which one pays his salary.

"Your people prepared me well." I frown with your brows. "And it's *Ms Leary*."

"My apologies, Ms Leary. What's the last thing you remember?"

This is the moment of truth—the moment to *tell* the truth. My lawyer and my accountant walked me through every line of that contract, so I know this for certain: I'm not supposed to be awake at the same time as you. The

extra time I had—if only as a silent watcher—was an error. A bug. Unintentional, but very much to my benefit, especially if it continues.

Free time.

You wouldn't understand. You're still a child; death isn't real to you yet. You've yet to experience your world shrinking first to a country, then a state, a neighbourhood, a single house, then at last, one room. A drab hospital bed. You don't understand what it means to hold on for dear life. I do. So, no. You'll forgive me if I hold my tongue.

"I remember my last scan; January third," I say steadily. Nobody expects an old lady to lie—though now that I present as a baby-faced Asian girl, I may not be able to lean on that anymore. "I was very ill. In the hospital. A Splice Tec came to my bedside, I think. I can hardly recall.…"

"You passed into our hands a week after that last backup. My condolences."

I wave his platitudes away. I neither possessed nor wanted mourners in my last life; I do not need them in this one. The family members I cared about are dead. The family members who live don't deserve my care. The one nephew who expressed any interest in me soon lost it when he found out I would not be going quietly into that good night but, instead, going loudly into a fresh body and taking his inheritance with me.

And speaking of that fresh body …

"I'm thirsty. I'd like a glass of ice water."

The Tec taps something out on his pad. "Let's do one better. You're going to get it yourself, as a diagnostic exercise."

A plump young nurse in pink scrubs walks in carrying a glass of water and, at a signal from the Tec, leaves it on his desk.

"I'd like you to stand, walk to the desk, pick up the glass, and take a drink."

I shift on the bed experimentally. You're shorter than I was; your limbs thicker and heavier than the ones I left behind—I was frail towards the end—but when your bare feet touch the chill polished-cement floor I find you sturdy and well-balanced beneath me. Practical. A Volvo, neat and tidy, one previous owner. I take the glass in your strong, steady hand, without one tremor or arthritic ache. You are young and whole. I drink greedily.

“Is your Driver to your liking?”

I lower the glass, smacking my plush new lips. “She’s fatter than she looked in the pictures.”

“You’re in the cooling-off period, ma’am, and it’s not too late to back out. You’d lose your deposit, but we do have a selection of *far* more premium Drivers available—“

“No. I chose this one for a reason. She’s value for money, and I didn’t make it as far as I did in life without the ability to recognise a good investment. Besides, I’m not interested in luxury; I’m interested in *time.* When you get to my age, you’ll understand.”

“Absolutely. If you’re committed to a long-term arrangement with this Driver, my advice is to keep things professional. We’ve found the system works best when Driver and Passenger live discrete, disconnected lives. Personal contact leads to interpersonal conflict. And as you’re aware, finding a neural match isn’t easy. You’re unlikely to find another Driver this”—he glances at his screen—“*economical*.”

“There’s no need to lecture me,” I say. Your voice comes out at a higher pitch than I’m accustomed to. I adjust, dipping your trachea, reaching deep into your chest to muster gravitas. “I built a portfolio of over sixty properties. I can manage one girl.”

“Of course.” The Tec clearly has other implants to get to, and he’s not hiding his impatience as well as I suspect he thinks he is. “If you have no further questions…”

I’m suddenly afraid that when he switches back to you, I’ll blink out again; afraid that my life will dwindle back to the promised two days per week and nothing more, life and time torrenting by beyond my reach. It’s what I paid for—but now I know I could have *more*.

Clinging to my new consciousness, I hedge for time. “I’m told you allow Drivers to review Passengers. Is this something I need to worry about?”

He laughs. “Ma’am, you’re the Passenger. It takes a *lot* for a Passenger to be blacklisted. You’ll be fine. Now, I need to end the test, but don’t worry. You’ll blink, and you’ll be standing in front of your gate, ready to pick up your life right where you left off.”

I nod. Your mouth is dry again, though not through lack of hydration.

“Great!” He raises his finger to the tablet. “From all of us here at Splice of Life: happy rebirthday.”

He taps the screen. In a blink, you are in control again.

But I’m still here.

YOU

That afternoon, you unpack at the beach shack I leased to you under our contract. Around five PM, in the golden dusk, you walk down the road to the local takeaway store and bring back a paper-wrapped bundle of hot, greasy chips. You sit on the low, skewed stone wall in the backyard and stare out at the ocean and weep, salting the chips with your tears.

The seaside shack was one of my earliest investments, built in the seventies, and I held on to it all these years out of sentimentality, I suppose. It hasn’t been renovated, and it’s little more than a cube of cement cinderblocks with rusted gutters and windows rimed with salt. But the *location*. Nothing stands between the back gate and the curling green waves but a steep expanse of clean white sand. No matter where you are inside the shack—the cramped olive-veneered kitchen, the dim living room, the sunrooms thinly walled in and windowed to form narrow sleepouts—you are surrounded by the arrhythmic murmur of the sea.

I spent many restful summers here when I was young. Stacks of moth-eaten *Life* magazines still teeter in the corners among my old furniture. An inexorable invasion of sand grits the plain black linoleum floors, and at all times of the year the brisk ocean breeze shoulders in through myriad tiny gaps and misalignments in the walls. While the house itself is fit only for a bulldozer, this land, this dream location, is worth almost two million. I always had an eye for a good investment.

Passengers are encouraged to supply accommodation for their Drivers, both for convenience and as partial payment, to reduce the hourly rate. So I have leased you this, and because it is very valuable, on paper, the rate reduction I enjoy in return is substantial.

Inside, you log on to your bank account on your phone. Your first payment is in. The screen displays several credit cards and a personal loan, all creaking under an astonishing amount of debt and missed-payment

charges, yet you have nothing to show for all that spending. The clothes you've been pulling out of a black garbage bag are cheap: denim shorts, T-shirts with cartoon characters and retro flower prints, off-brand sneakers. You don't own a car. You showed up with minimal furniture. I had assumed this was because the place was already furnished, but now I'm not certain. Chewing the frayed edge of your thumbnail, you begin transferring money from your pay into the most urgently overdue accounts. It's like watching someone trying to fill a bathtub with a teaspoon.

Your life is, I remind myself, none of my concern. If you cannot manage money, all the better. It will make you need me more.

After, you open another cardboard box. Art prints, framed maps, a photograph of you and a skinny Indian girl standing arm in arm on the Brooklyn Bridge. Clutching the photograph tightly, you wander around the house, scanning the walls—looking for hooks, I realise. You find none. I never hung any artwork here and if you think you're going to hammer nails into my panelling, little miss, you're sorely mistaken. Sighing, you prop the photograph against the wall by the bed.

The final box must contain something practical, perhaps your *good* clothes.

No. More art. This time, a stack of unframed canvases ridged with whorls of thick oil paint. The top painting is a landscape, mountains embracing a bay in bright slashes of colour. Serviceable work. Very modern. You heft the entire box into the second enclosed sleepout where my erstwhile piglet of a nephew used to stay for holidays as a child. Under the stack of canvases you've packed a folded-down easel, which you set up in a corner near the salt-dimmed windows. You lean the canvases on the wall beside it. The signature on the top painting is your name.

Oh dear. You are an *artist*. That explains so much.

Your paints come out of the box next, and a blank canvas you place on the easel. Clutching a tube of vermillion, you stare at the waiting white for a long time.

You shake your head and walk down the beach instead.

The broad crescent of sand is bone in the moonlight, the sea pulsing silver. You stand with your feet in the cold hissing foam and light a joint.

This is expressly against the rules. Your first handover is at nine AM and I'm supposed to receive your body clean of substances. I'll have to find some way to complain—without revealing how I found out.

Come to mention it, your chest hurts too. I wonder how they missed it in the exam, this tightness. It's probably because you are fat. All young people seem to be fat these days. There's no propriety anymore, no pride in one's appearance. I imagine you'll want to dye your hair blue next; I wonder if that's forbidden under the body modification clause. The tattoos you already have surely contributed to your bargain-basement price. How hypocritical that you have no problem marring yourself with these ridiculous designs when, if I dared apply a skin lightening cream to you, I'd be painted as the devil herself.

When you sleep, I remain awake in the darkness behind your eyes. It's like sitting in the muffled stillness of a car with the engine still warm and ticking, watching you doze in the driver's seat while I sit helplessly on the passenger's side, the pedals out of my reach.

You dream.

My chip must have tendrils in the image processing part of your mind, because I can see what you're seeing even now, though it lacks the clarity of real sight. The speed is all wrong, like an old film from a hand-cranked camera. I glimpse faces, snatches of arguments, shifting landscapes. I cannot make sense of it. It's like eavesdropping on an indecipherable whispered conversation, or watching a distant thunderhead flicker with silent lightning. Someone else's storm.

You are walking on a beach, in your dream, when you pause—your heart rate picks up—and the beach dissolves around you. The scattered tendrils of your sleeping awareness draw together into a sharp point of attention. You turn.

You look at me—

—and jolt awake.

Panting, you whip around to face every dark corner of the room. Nothing waits for you there but fake pine cladding and a jumbled stack of paperbacks. Your heart thundering in your chest, your tank top gluey with sweat, you croak, "Hello?"

There is no answer but the endless groan and sigh of the waves.

The next morning, you walk the forty minutes to my home for your first handover, earbuds playing a stream of relentlessly upbeat nonsense. Midway through Britney's demand to be hit one more time, your phone sirens the two-minute warning. You pocket the earbuds, curl your soft young fingers around my home's wrought iron gate, and peek through. The elegant Italian cypress trees lining the curved drive like green Greek columns reveal only a sliver of the mansion beyond, the white walls blinding in the morning light.

Eight fifty-nine AM.

Your gut curdles. Envy? Anxiety? Both? I cannot say. I feel the physical effects of your thoughts, but the thoughts themselves are the only part of you unavailable to—

ME

I can *move*. I tap in the gate code and walk up my driveway on your feet.

The cleaners have been, and the black marble countertops glimmer under stainless-steel teardrop pendants. No cobweb touches the classical chandelier in the foyer. My books have been dusted, my throw pillows arranged, the wide fireplace loaded with a fresh stack of wood, all of it waiting for me to pick up where I left off. Now I can enjoy it without aches and constant medical appointments. Youth really is wasted on the young.

First: Let's investigate *you.*

My dressing room is a converted bedroom, my handbags and shoes arranged by hue along one wall, a rainbow of leather. My clothing lines the wall opposite. Up the back I keep a trio of angled full-length mirrors, and above those, a portrait of myself.

This is the only room in the house where I have bothered to hang a painting: an Archibald Prize finalist in 2027. The painter was a talented young man who had the economic good sense to suck up to a potential patron, and he was duly rewarded—financially, if not critically. In recent decades, the Archibald has moved away from traditional approaches and begun to reward the portraiture equivalent of fingerpainting—you ought to consider entering something—but the traditional style of this piece suits me

well: a sensible approach for a sensible person. In the painting, I gaze sternly down at the viewer, old though not yet infirm. I didn't age like a wine, but like an avocado: rock-hard and self-contained for most of my life, then wrinkled and rotten all at once, seemingly overnight.

I could hang the painting more prominently in my living room, but I prefer to keep it to myself.

Before the mirrors I peel off your too-tight jeans, noting spatters of coloured paint staining the denim. A soft thump on the plush carpet—your phone has fallen from your back pocket, and the sight of it reminds me that I have a question in need of an answer. I hunt for my own phone, but in my absence, the help have *helpfully* stashed it god knows where. Impatient, I pick up yours instead. Facial recognition unlocks the screen, inviting me in.

There's no harm in borrowing it. What's a phone compared to an entire body? I tap up the browser and thumb in my query.

Passenger seeing through drivers eyes when not in control

The search returns too many results related to vehicular safety. I try:

Splice of life passenger awake all the time

Before I can focus on the results, a message notification flashes up:

bullshit.

Intrigued, I pull up the conversation. The name at the top of the screen is *DICKHEAD.* The messages go back three months, but begin abruptly, appearing to pick up from an earlier conversation you wiped. The first several messages were all sent by you.

MABEL
OCT 1

Ben, I know you wanted us to go no-contact, but I need you to pay back the $30k I loaned you. You said you'd have something after tax time but it's been months and I'm just wondering what's happening.

OCT 6

Hey, I tried calling. Is this still your #?

OCT 8

Please talk to me. I'm desperate and you PROMISED you'd pay me back.

OCT 13

Hi Ben. I'm really sorry but if I don't hear from you today, I'm going to try calling your mum.

DICKHEAD
OCT 13

Wow WTF Mabel. That's messed up.

MABEL
OCT 14

Thank you for getting back to me!! I'm so so sorry to bother you, I just really need that money back ASAP—once I've got it, you won't hear from me again.

DICKHEAD
OCT 15

This is so typical. No boundaries. Making threats to get ur way. Every message always me me me. This is why our relationship failed & I can see u haven't changed

MABEL
OCT 15

Sorry Ben can we just sort out the debt? I'll get out of your hair then.

What happened to the tax refund??

DICKHEAD
OCT 17

Wasn't as much as I expected, not that my finances are ur business

You'll get your $ when I have it

We're over Mabel. Deal.

MABEL
OCT 17

ETA? The interest rate on the loan I took out for you keeps going up, I can't handle the payments.

NOV 1
Hello?

NOV 24
I signed up to Splice.

JAN 3
Signed a contract. Getting the chip in tmw.

DICKHEAD
TODAY, 9:22 AM
bullshit.

The phone pings and a new message pops up.

DICKHEAD
NOW
U wouldn't let me take photos of u, but u do this?

So much for not selling ur body.

Here is the source of your debt, then, and it's not even anything as interesting as Gucci handbags, drugs, or overambitious world travel. It's a man. Hah, no. No credit where none is due—it's a *boy*.

I roll your eyes and switch back to my query on always-awake Passengers, which has returned a great deal of discussion and conspiracy, but no confirmed reports. Splice of Life's FAQ insists such a thing is not possible.

I set the phone aside and strip off the rest of your clothes, turning slowly in front of the mirrors. The lighting I had installed in here is designed to flatter, but some flaws can't be floodlit away. Heavy thighs. Muscular calves from all the walking you do. Stringy flat black hair fine as sparrow down. Your underarms are waxed but your legs and bikini line are most

certainly not. What an odd duck you are. Oh, and look at those traces of acne on the cheeks—both sets. This won't do.

None of my old clothes fit you and I'll be damned if I'll walk around all day in paint-stained denim jeans and a Tweety T-shirt. I select a handbag and call a cab.

I wonder what you would think of me using my costly time for this. You probably still have lofty ideas about spending a life in pursuit of art or truth or some nonsense. Let me tell you, child, when you're lying in a hospital bed befouling yourself as your body falls apart around you, you realise what matters. You are a brain in a body long before any other concern enters the picture, and you are a brain in a body after all else falls away. Currently, I am a brain in *your* body, and I mean to craft that body into a worthy vessel.

Beautician first. Then a quick visit to my hairdresser for a treatment and trim; nothing that will fundamentally change your style. Both women struggle to adjust to the idea that you're *me*, but then, their chosen professions are hardly a testament to their mental faculties. I have the beautician pluck a few stray hairs from the edges of your eyebrows—only subtly, for now. Arguably what I'm doing could fall under the contractual body modification exclusion, but the changes I'm planning are hardly along the lines of tattoos or blue hair. I can do all this piecemeal over weeks, for a gradual transformation you won't notice. It's not as though you pay attention to your appearance anyway. Your body is a temple: oversized, underused, and full of wishful thinking.

After a few boutiques and a restaurant, I arrive home at eight PM, annoyed I've wasted most of my first day on basic upkeep you ought to be managing yourself. You and your faulty chip are worth the investment though.

I dress you in your own clothes and pull the Splice of Life app up on my phone. For your first rating, I give you four stars, subtracting one for the marijuana. But I want us to get off on the right foot—we share feet now, after all—so I don't mention the drugs in my review. Besides, I haven't come up with a convincing way to conceal how I know.

That done, I walk you back to the shack, to save you the commute, and because your flabby thighs need the workout.

YOU

You blink awake and look around, brows knitting at the sight of the shack. Your heart rate skips from *andante* to *allegro*. Strange. You stomp into the shack, flinging open the door so hard the breeze sends the framed photo by the bed toppling to the floor with a *crack.*

You jab open the Splice of Life app. In the review box, you swipe: *Passenger came to my house. I thought privacy was guaranteed???*

You leave me two stars.

Two stars? Outrageous! This ungracious entitlement makes young people so difficult to employ. You ought to work on your attitude, given how much you need this job. Besides, this is *my* house. It's not as though the location is a secret. I've seen it all before, darling.

You jump in the shower with a podcast playing, and scrub yourself head to toe in water far too hot for my tastes. I don't see why you feel the need; I had a lovely lavender-salt bath earlier, and surely you can still smell the lingering fragrance. Towelling your hair off roughly, you fling yourself naked onto your bed and pick up your phone. You open your message app and pause, biting your lip, staring at DICKHEAD's morning messages. They're all marked as *read*.

"What the *fuck*." You raise your eyes to the small mirror hanging on the wall in your cramped bedroom. "Did that bitch use my phone?"

You switch off facial recognition and set a password on the device; I take note of the code, just in case.

Only then do you open your messages again and absorb the last two texts from DICKHEAD. You curl up on the bed with your damp towel sagging off your body and cry.

ME

Weeks and handovers pass. I move through the marble silence of my home; you sit in the oceanic heartbeat of your shack. This body of yours responds to your secret thoughts with surges of adrenaline, flushes of warmth, storms of the heart. When I'm in charge, I tamp these sensations down, but you?

You let them sweep you out to some foreign emotional sea. I don't recall being so fragile in my twenties. What a waste of our youthful vitality.

YOU

You don't notice the gradual removal of your brows until the third week, when I go too far and you, squinting at your reflection in a magnifying mirror, spot the puckered pores where hair used to be. You leave me two stars, and type and retype three progressively more polite versions of the same review before you lodge it.

ME

I'm shocked to discover you take shifts in the local McDonald's. McDonald's! The constant screaming alarms of the crowded, greasy, stinking McKitchen give me a McHeadache. Well, it's *your* headache. I'm just stuck feeling it.

This is so unnecessary. Who in their right mind would work in a hellhole like this? You could earn so much more selling that time to me. Why won't you?

Your hair stinks of stale cooking grease. Two stars.

YOU

In the dead of the night before a handover day, when you can't sleep, you slip your fingers between cotton and flesh to the slick heat between your legs. At first you move slowly, a subconscious call-and-response to the sighing waves beyond the shack, but after a time you find a rhythm of your own. Your motions are minimal, direct; your breathing is quiet. No twisting or moaning. This is not a performance. It is for nobody but you.

Yet here we are, together, at the end.

ME

I am always exceptionally relaxed the next day. Five stars.

YOU

You can't paint. I don't mean you're terrible; I mean you cannot paint. You begin, many times, but nothing seems to satisfy you, and inevitably you cover the attempt with a thick wash of white, erasing it, leaving yourself with the same blank canvas, over and over.

ME

My friend Jacquelyn's ridiculous husband calls me Temu Rose, whatever the hell that means, and makes no less than three lewd jokes about our appearance over brunch, until I cut him off by telling Jackie she ought to confiscate his little blue pills. She sniffs, waves for the cheque, and tells me she thought I might have chosen a more *appropriate* body.

I consider trying another Driver—but no. I won't risk losing my free ride. Far cheaper to replace my acquaintances.

YOU

You have coffee with a friend in the city too. Afterwards, at the grocery store, you see DICKHEAD with his arm around a skinny young brunette with a diamanté stud in her navel. They are smiling at each other, and don't notice you.

At home you scroll through photographs of you and DICKHEAD on your phone. You lie prone in bed, barely breathing, like you are buried to the neck in wet sand. Your friends are tired of coaching you through this suppurating heartbreak. I can see it in their increasingly distant messages. I think you see it too.

I don't judge. Better women than you have fallen to worse men than him, and in my youth, even I needed a harsh lesson before I figured out that men can only ever be a burden. When you are weak, they use you; when you are strong, they resent you. So let this lesson scar; let it thicken your heart. Best that nobody else is competing with me for your time.

You cry yourself to sleep. Tiresome.

ME

After handover the next morning, you leave me with eyes so red and swollen they are beyond the help of cold cream and cucumber slices. I refuse to leave the house in such a state. I cancel my plans.

One star.

US

Four months in, you're called into Splice of Life because your ratings have dropped below the approved threshold. Through the conduit of the Tec with the surfer's tan, we have our first real conversation.

Complaints are raised—carefully, on my part; I can only speak about things I am supposed to know.

Fussy little rules are set, mainly on your part. I promise to respect them.

You tell the Tec that you sometimes feel like you're being watched. The Tec assures you that subconscious anxiety about the process is natural. "Our in-house psychologist is available to you free of charge," he adds, "but your Passenger would need to be informed. She has a legal right to full disclosure of all health issues, including mental health. It could affect your hourly rate."

"Oh," you mumble. "No. It's fine. Just my overactive imagination."

When the Tec wakes me up, I lean in, curious about the interface he's using. "You really can just wake me up with the push of a button, can't you?"

He laughs. "Don't even go there, ma'am. If you want more hours, you gotta renegotiate terms with your Driver."

"That girl could make a fortune if she agreed to work for me full-time."

"We can ask her today, if you like. She seems keen to keep it casual though."

"Why are young people so unmotivated? Whatever happened to 'the customer is always right'?"

He shrugs. "Some people are more suited for this than others. But it's best to try to make it work with the Driver you have."

I have every intention of doing so. Through the Tec, I talk you into quitting your job at McDonald's and selling more time to me instead. I ask

for the full five days—forty hours—per week, the legal maximum time a Passenger can use their Driver. Reluctantly, you agree to just one extra day.

Bully for you. Now you'll have more time to not paint.

YOU

The morning of our Friday handover, you wake up early to take a call from your best friend, Prisha, who moved to the UK shortly before DICKHEAD left you. Prisha is a birdlike Indian girl with thick spectacles, a thicker plait, and an accent thicker still. The video chat window frames a slice of her room, an angled attic wall papered with bright postcards and prints.

"You extended the contract? I thought you were going to get that idiotic thing out of your skull!" Prisha says. "Your messages are scaring me. You sound worse now than you did last year. It's the chip—"

You groan. "Thanks, *Mum*, but it's not the chip, it's me. Anyway, I need it."

"This is avoidance, Mabes. You can't keep hiding from … *existing*. Only time fixes heartbreak—"

"—and only money fixes debt—"

"—and if you keep *selling* all your time—"

"We *all* sell our time! Welcome to existence under capitalism." You scrunch up your face, trying to make light, but your chest is tight as always.

"This is different," Prisha insists. "At a normal job you can daydream, talk, think. You're not just selling your time now, you're selling off your *life*!"

You shift uncomfortably. Your dated laptop runs hot; the aluminium casing scalds your bare knees. "I've got a place to live, Prish. I've paid off all the cards but one. And it's only another six months. Just enough time to build up some savings, and then I'll have actual choices…"

Prisha bites her lip. "You said you feel like you're being watched…"

"Remember when I thought our share house in Lenah Valley was haunted?"

"That place had bad juju. And black mould."

"Six more months, then I'm free."

"Or you give notice now—it's a one-month notice period, right? I buy you a ticket, and you come stay with me for a few months. That's a real escape—a healthy one. You can do silly tourist stuff. And paint! I've got a trundle you can sleep on. Come *on*, I miss you…"

You hesitate.

No wonder your life is a mess, with friends like these. How dare this girl undermine you just as you've begun making good choices? How *dare* she show up now and try to drag you away from the sensible path I've laid out for you? In the warm hollow of your mind, I rage and curse, and with a convulsive jerk, your hand twitches into a fist.

You startle, shake it out.

"You okay, Mabes?" Prisha asks.

"Yeah … muscle cramp."

Incredulous, I try to make your hand move again. Nothing happens.

"Six more months." You rub your hand on your jeans uneasily. "Then I get the chip out and start over. I promise."

No. That's not enough time. I thought we were getting somewhere, but you're slipping away.

It won't do.

ME

I try to go on with my usual long weekend as planned, but I get little done and enjoy none of it. At eight thirty PM on Sunday, I stand in front of the mirror, breathing hard, glaring at your face in the glass. I lash out. You splinter into a thousand glimmering shards. A trickle of blood runs down your knuckle, and I absently brush it away.

Ten years of life is all I need. You could have the weekends. Just the two days, of course, but I think we both know that two days of my life is a substantial upgrade—quality over quantity. You could live in the big house, in luxury. It's a better deal than you'll get working for anyone else. Ten years, and you'll be set for life—and so will I. In a decade, the technology will have come far enough that I won't need you anymore. Who knows what they'll have invented by then—android bodies, or clones—or, simpler still, as politicians begin to age out and stare down the barrel of their own

mortality, they'll reverse the blanket ban on transfer of whole-life ownership. Ten years, and I'll be able to *buy* a body; I'd bet my life on it. No more handovers, no ticking clock. No more negotiations with silly little girls. Just a body of my own: my property.

Who knows? I might even be able to build up a portfolio.

I haphazardly pluck up the shards of glass and stick a plaster on your hand. Out in my kitchen, leaning on the chill marble counter, I write you a letter. The nib of my fountain pen skates across the surface of the cream paper, steady in your young, strong hand. I write your name large and loopy up top as the two-minute siren wails. I make this letter beautiful for you. It's the offer of a lifetime.

With seconds to spare, I arrange your body so your hand is touching the paper, so my words will be the first thing you see.

YOU

You stare around my house in bewilderment. From your perspective, this is the first time you've been here.

Frowning, you snatch the letter and scan it. Then you read it again, slowly, your gaze lingering on certain phrases.

—ongoing arrangement—

—weekends will be yours—

—make this house your permanent residence—

Your eyes return again and again to the dollar amount I've promised. You have, temporarily, forgotten to breathe.

The letter ends on a smaller offer, an easy choice. This is a standard tactic of mine. Get someone to say yes to something small, and you have them primed to say yes to something big. The offer is this:

Don't decide tonight. Spend the week here—make yourself at home. Sleep in the guest room, the one with the pink linen. Eat and drink anything you like. Take baths. Listen to the birds. The light in the garden is beautiful in the mornings. Enjoy a coffee before handover. Imagine that this is your life.

I can offer you so much more than reliance on the charity of a friend. I can give you comfort. Dignity. Security.

Write your answer at the bottom of this note, and I will arrange everything.

Your Passenger,

Rose.

You drop the letter and stare around the house once more. Gooseflesh ripples up your arms. You head for the door—but when your bare feet leave the marble floor of the kitchen and sink into the plush carpet of the third living room, you gasp at the softness and hesitate, curling your toes in the thick weave like a child.

And you stay.

Monday sees you tentatively flitting between the guest room I assigned you and the kitchen, seemingly afraid to touch anything. Eventually, hunger drives you to make yourself a toasted cheese sandwich. You use four kinds of cheese, including a valuable White Stilton Gold I ordered from Britain.

On Tuesday, you are bolder. You wander the house, winding up in my dressing room, where you run your hands along the racks of clothing—by now, everything there has been tailored to fit our body. You try a few outfits on and twine a string of diamonds around your neck. You stand in front of the missing panel in the triple mirror, frowning faintly at your own well-dressed reflection in the unbroken panels that remain.

Above the mirror, my Archibald portrait glares down at you. Studying my face, you take a step closer—and hiss in pain, jerking your foot back. A shard of glass gleams in the thick carpet by the mirror. You pinch it carefully between two fingers, then leave it on the kitchen counter because you can't seem to figure out which of the dozens of drawers and cabinets conceals the trash can.

On Wednesday you walk the gardens, pulling a few dewy young weeds the groundskeeper missed. You drink wine on the couch and figure out how to operate the audiovisual system, which I rarely touched but was assured is the best on the market. That night, you take a long, luxurious bubble bath. *Ooh* at the warm touch of the bathroom's underfloor heating. For a while, you play some sort of incomprehensible foreign pop music through the speakers artfully hidden about my house, and dance through every room.

On Thursday morning, you sit on the porch swing, cradling a cup of tea, and listen to the birds. All you do, for most of that last day, is sit and think. There is a tremendous calm in your chest throughout. You've made your choice. I can feel it.

As a fat yellow moon rises over the water, you perch in the carved swinging chair on the back verandah and sip pink champagne from a crystal flute. You prop the letter on your thigh, wrinkling the stiff cream paper, and scratch your reply.

Dear Rose,

Thank you for your kind offer. It helped me figure out what I want, and I'm so sorry to tell you this, but we need to make an appointment for cancellation on Monday—being a Driver isn't working out for me. I'll happily serve out my one-month notice, and I'm grateful for the amazing opportunity. Thanks again for everything.

Mabel

ME

You *bitch.*

Selfish, lazy, irresponsible little *cunt.* Asleep in *my* house, belly full of *my* food and drink, head empty of any shred of gratitude. Your sleep is the deep sleep of someone experiencing a truly comfortable bed for the first time in her life. Your sleep is the sleep of someone at peace. Your sleep is the sleep of a *moron*.

Fuck you.

In sleep, as always, you relinquish your grip on the nerve endings in your body—a natural process, evolved to prevent you thrashing around when you dream. I've never paid it much mind. Tonight, I don't allow myself to be distracted by the flickering hopes and anxieties that pluck at your consciousness in the dark. Tonight, I focus on the sensations of your limp body, limbs lying there abandoned for the taking.

I focus all my attention on the nerve endings in your pinkie finger.

Move.

I force myself through neural pathways and fill your mind with **ME**.

MOVE.

I spread out. I force **ME** into every corner of your body.

MOVE—

Your finger twitches.

If I had your mouth yet, I would smile.

US

It's eight thirty AM on the third day, the last day, and you are standing in my dressing room, brushing your hair in front of one of the remaining mirrors in readiness for handover at nine. when your eyes wander back to the Archibald portrait. Your brush slows, then stops, as though you've remembered something.

You are very still but for your chest, which rises and falls rapidly, like the flank of a frightened rabbit. You drop the brush and dig the answered letter out of your back pocket, almost tearing it in your haste to find the words:

I can offer you so much more than reliance on the charity of a friend.

The letter starts trembling in your hands, then slips from your fingers. I still don't understand what's going on, not until you fumble out your phone and text Prisha:

MABEL

She knows I'm coming to visit you. How??

Am I going crazy? Is she fucking WATCHING me???

Your blood chills, responding to your terror—or perhaps to mine. How did I overlook this? I've grown complacent in my private panopticon. *Foolish.*

You stand frozen for several heartbeats, then your thumbs move jerkily, darting through several menus on your phone to pull up the browser history.

You scroll, pausing to scan certain dates, until you reach January and find the day of our first handover and I remember, right before you see it,

what you are about to find, and for a moment I can't tell where your gut-dropping horror ends and mine begins.

SEARCH: *Passenger seeing through drivers eyes when not in control*

SEARCH: *Splice of life passenger awake all the time*

You shudder convulsively, dropping your phone to the counter with a clatter that snaps the sealed silence like a gunshot. You snatch it again and fumble a call through to Splice of Life. The line rings and rings. It is eight forty-three AM on a Sunday. Oh, let the office be closed; I'm not ready—

Someone picks up and we startle.

"Hello, Splice of Life, you've reached Soshanna. How may I—"

I thumb the screen and disconnect the call.

"What the fuck?" you whisper.

No point hiding now. I uncurl your fingers from the phone one by one. It falls to the plush carpet with a muffled thump. You try to move your fingers but I hold them tight, clawed. Gut-sick and sweating, you raise your eyes to your reflection.

You raise your eyes to **ME**.

"Oh god," you moan.

The world blurs; a thin tear creeps down your cheek.

"If you're … if you're listening—" Your voice cracks. "I don't want your fucking house. I don't want your fucking money. I want you out of my *head*, and I'm going to get you out."

You sprint for the kitchen, of all places, and I'm so taken aback I fumble my thread of control. You stop in front of the refrigerator, a large stainless-steel model, and as you stretch to paw around the sides, I realise you're looking for *magnets*, as though a refrigerator magnet could wipe me away, as though I would ever clutter my house with such gaudy trinkets, and I'm so astonished I laugh aloud—and my mirth bursts from your lips.

You clamp both hands over your mouth, dart out of the kitchen, and dive for the phone. When we hit the dense carpet, we are at war. I have your fingers, so you use the heel of your hand to smack the phone button and, when I twist your wrist painfully away, you elbow the screen to bring up your close contacts. There are only two numbers there: Prisha and DICKHEAD. You slap the screen with more force than aim.

I will never know which you were trying to call, but when I roll your body away from the phone, it is dialling your useless ex-boyfriend, and I grin with your lips.

The call goes to voice mail. The sound of his voice galvanises you. You shove yourself to your feet and sprint back to the kitchen, and you are screaming into the phone, screaming for help, screaming the address. I wrest back control of our arm and fling your phone hard to the marble floor and the *crack* it makes on the first bounce is not sharp but crunchy. It lands face up, screen black, chunks of glass gone, like a grin with knocked-out teeth. Unevenly, it starts chiming the fifteen-minute handover warning.

The mirror shard you left on the counter catches a cold gleam of morning light. You lunge for it, snatch it, raise it to your temple, and, whimpering, slowly sink it into the tiny scar there. The point drives a searing white flare of pain into your head, and in your clenched fist, the glass sears open a flap of skin across your palm. Maybe it's the pain, or maybe I just win, but we drop the shard. You're concentrating so hard on reaching for it, you forget to mind your legs. I kick the shard away and it *tink*s to a landing somewhere in the tiled foyer.

You try again, I'll give you that. You fight, clawing the carpet, heading for the kitchen, now, gaining inches as the minutes stretch to an excruciating eternity, losing them again as I pour all the force I have into your limbs. You have your eyes—I don't need them—and it takes me longer than it should to realise you're sneaking glances at the knife block gleaming atop the counter.

Oh, you little beast; those are hand-forged Damascus steel. Fury spiking, I smash our nose into the floor.

The carpet cushions the worst of it, but you weren't ready for the hot blossom of pain. I was. Seizing control, I crawl and flop us away from the kitchen on our belly, nose streaming and spattering the carpet, gaining territory, the touch of cool tile beneath your blood-sticky cheek marking the foyer, a small victory. With nothing to grip, I switch to an inelegant roll; anything to get you far from the armoury of the kitchen. It's almost easy, now…

It's *too* easy. You're letting me win. Why?

The front door—it's barely five feet away. Oh! You never looked at it, not once, you cunning bitch. I almost admire you.

I thrust a hand beneath us, arresting our roll, slick hand slipping on the tile. A joint pops in your little finger, adding a new shriek of pain to the chorus. In the agony and exhaustion—I've lost all sense of how much time has passed—my grip on you begins to slide.

No. I can't let you go. I have too much to lose. So do you. Slowly, slowly, we twist and thrash closer to the front door.

Something jabs into your hip, crunching against the tile. You roll to your hands and knees and grab the shard of glass reflexively, triumphantly, and all I can do is scream in rage with your throat.

And the two-minute siren howls with me.

The front door flies open and that lanky art-school-dropout of a boy strides into the house, clutching a cricket bat. The little bastard must have scaled my fence. He freezes. You must be a terrible sight: eyes wild and rolling, face streaked with blood, kneeling on tiles smeared with sticky scarlet. You're clutching a dagger of glass in one lacerated hand.

"Holy shit, Mabel!" Blanching, he drops the bat. "What've you done?"

"Get her out!" you scream, waving the shard at him. "She's in my head, she's awake! The chip, the *chip*, cut it out of me!"

"We have to get you to a hos—"

"There's no time! She takes over at nine! She won't give me back! PLEASE!" Your terrified eyes flick from his place to the art deco clock on my wall. It's eight fifty-nine AM.

"Jesus, Mabel! I'm gonna pay back the fucking money, okay? You don't have to—"

"HELP ME!" This scream razors your throat.

You bring the glass up in a wild sweeping arc. The boy lunges, seizes your wrist in a crushing grip, stopping your hand an instant before the sharp point can sink into your temple. He squeezes; you drop the glass. He bears you down to the floor, cursing over your screams and the wailing siren, kneeling on your legs as you kick and writhe and howl.

You are strong, so strong now, so desperate to cling to your life that now, at last, you are truly fighting for it. Oh, Mabel. I'm so proud of you.

blink.

ME

"Get your hands off me, boy."

Startled, he lets go. "Mabel?"

"Please," I snap, "try to keep up."

He backs off, his stupid slack mouth working as he struggles to find words from his undoubtedly limited supply. Ignoring him, I cross the room to my hidden safe, dribbling blood across the cream carpet. I release a concealed panel, enter the combination, and scoop the ten thousand in cash I keep for emergencies into a paper bag as the boy watches in bewildered silence.

"I'm sorry you had to come here today, Ben. This is for your troubles."

His eyes flicker from me to the money and back. "You're— She's bleeding.…"

"I'll take care of it. Mabel is in crisis. She needs *help*, and I'm equipped to give it. But having you in her life isn't good for her—so, for her sake, let's make this a clean break. Block her number and never contact her again. Do you understand?"

He hesitates.

"I'll be covering what you owe her. Your debt is settled."

Shame tints his wan skin an ugly pink. Hangdog, he reaches out to take my money.

I twitch the bag out of his grasp, forcing him to meet my eyes. "I know some very dangerous men who will do me favours for far less than this. Bear that in mind." This is an outrageous lie—I'm a landlord, not a mafioso, for god's sake—but *he* doesn't know that.

He snatches the money and leaves in a hurry.

Trembling, bloodied, I raise one hand to my slick face. I have three days before you're due to take over again. I can hold you off for minutes, I believe; given practice, maybe days. Not, I suspect, a week. But if I handle the next few hours well, I won't have to.

I fetch my own phone and call my accountant, then my property broker. I always thought about retiring to Italy. Now seems like the right time. You

only live twice.

On speakerphone, I clean up in the bathroom, wash and dry my hair, apply antiseptic powder and butterfly bandages to my hands, and cover the wound on my temple with a sticking plaster. I part my hair to conceal the side of my face. I will get this seen to properly, but there's something far more important to do first.

The second I hang up on the broker, my phone rings again: Splice of Life following up on a dropped call logged by the system this morning, registered to my Driver's number. Is there a problem?

"No problem. My Driver and I renegotiated. We're coming in."

ME

The Tec and I sit across from one another at his little rolling desk. A rakish beret and a fine pair of leather gloves hide my wounds.

I say: "We've agreed on a new contract—changes to the hours and location."

I say: "Yes, we exchanged letters. I know it's not ideal, but it worked for us."

I say: "I'd even call us friends."

I sign the new contract. He reaches for the control to activate Mabel so she can do the same. Taking a steadying breath, I reach for my own control and hold on for dear life.

blink.

After a moment, I relax into an insipid smile and speak in your cadence. "I'm good, thanks. Yeah. Rose is cool. She made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

ME

I move to a neat little villa south of Naples.

Weekends are a time of vigilance now. On paper, that's when our new contract allows you control. I, of course, do not. To keep up appearances, I leave Splice reviews from the both of us. The inconvenience is minor. In

fact, I begin to enjoy writing from your perspective. By all accounts, you are having a wonderful time.

I sell the properties I no longer have any use for. The derelict shack on the beach fetches almost as much as the manor, though of course the buyer wanted it just for the land. The shack, I imagine, will be for the bulldozer.

ME

Over time, Mabel's so-called friends swallow the fiction that she moved to Italy and fell out of touch—all but that little snoop Prisha, who persists despite every *Busy with the move* and *Bad connection* and *Broken phone*. She slips questions into her messages like *Hey, what was the name of that Lenah Valley housemate who bailed after a month?* so casually, as though I can't see what she's doing. I manufacture a fight to get rid of her.

She texts: *This isn't like you.*

Three weeks later, the Florence branch of Splice of Life insists Mabel come in for a "routine check," and I'm forced to hang on for dear life when they switch control, forced to simper and laugh and play the fool, and all the while a headache pounds, pounds, pounds like fists hammering the inside of my skull.

I don't need to manufacture the fight with Prisha that follows. She goes quiet at last—though I know better than most that *quiet* doesn't mean *gone*, and on the weekends, when I leave the house to go to the bustling market, I find myself looking behind—

ME

Awake, asleep, you're always *there*, behind me, no matter how fast I turn around.

ME

It's Saturday. My head pounds. I wince in the syrupy afternoon light. Where am I? Kitchen. Yes, of course. My lovely slate-tiled kitchen with its merry brass fittings and polished oak beams. Now, what was I…? Oh, yes. Chopping a parsnip, fresh from the market. It sits half sliced and abandoned

on the cutting board, gnarled and bloodless as an old woman's finger. The knife is in my raised hand, the blade turned inwards. The point brushes my temple.

After that, I stay in on the weekends. My world shrinks to a single room and then, with the incessant headaches, a single bed. It's a small price to pay for control. The weekdays still belong to—

ME

I jolt out of my reverie, sitting alone at the sidewalk café downstairs, fingers fidgeting in lukewarm liquid. Upended, my white china cup has spilled black coffee across the Formica tabletop, though not in a pool. It's been streaked and smeared into something that looks terribly like a landscape painting.

It's Thursday.

ME

Calm down, you. There's no need to fight. Your time will come.

ME

When I'm good and ready.

ME

ME

ME

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