

THE KING'S GAME (SAMPLE)

CHAPTER TWO ARISTOCRACY

THE KING'S GAME

BOOK ONE

RICHARD LIGHT

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CHAPTER 7

“Paul, we have a problem.”

“Dominic, you never call me,” Paul replied.

“There’s a cop in Vero Beach running Dave’s license. That is a problem.”

“Shit. He got pulled over for a tail light the other day,” Paul sighed. “He and Derek checked. The lights are fine.”

“Then we have a bigger problem,” Dominic replied. “I have a potential solution I have been kicking around, but they should lay low for a bit.”

“OK, keep me posted,” Paul said as he hung up.

“Dave look, nothing you do is bringing back your wife,” Derek said as he leaned on the bar. “Besides, why would you want her back? Done is done. Once they decide to leave, set them free and forget them. They will never respect you if you don’t. They can respect you from wherever their choices take them but not anywhere near you. That’s a solid rule to live by. If more men did this, and we won’t because pussy makes most of us useless and weak, women might behave better but I doubt it. If you took her back, she would tolerate you for a while and you’ll feel like you have been vindicated and have won. Forget all of that. It’s an odd hypocrisy with women. They can bang the neighborhood and if you forgive them and take them back, they lose respect for *you*.”

“You said she looked unhappy,” Dave lamented.

“She did and she deserves to be. But that doesn’t mean she wants you back. It’s certainly no reason to take her back. Screw that chick. This place is full of them. Start thinking of them as a commodity. Go get a new one. Get a whole harem of them. Remember, multiple marriages are illegal in this country not multiple girlfriends,” Derek said with a grin.

“Why are you laughing?” Dave asked.

“I am not. I know you are suffering. We’ve all been there. I left what could have been the best woman I have ever met to move here,” Derek said trying to console the man who was becoming his friend. “And her response was to tell me she was trying to replace me. If she is actively trying to replace you, she will eventually land on someone adequate.”

They stared at their drinks long enough to ignore a large man in a pressed shirt and tie who slid up to the bar next to them. Derek looked over, making eye contact halfheartedly, opening himself up to conversation.

“Hello, my name’s Prescott,” the man volunteered.

“Like Arizona?” Derek replied, ready to be entertained. “It’s pronounced Pres-kitt.”

The man stared at him blankly as if his audience should be more interested to know who he was. Derek could sense the man was already somewhat drunk and ready for verbal combat. He could see the wheels in Prescott’s head tightening the skin on his forehead as he searched for a rebuttal.

“I am a very prestigious corporate attorney in this town,” Prescott announced.

“Do you work at the airplane factory?” Derek asked in a voice rhythm he reserved for toddlers. “Are there other corporations around here I don’t know about? Are you involved in citrus?”

“There are plenty. I am also a CPA,” Prescott went on.

“Wow, a double threat of excitement. Do you do taxes *and* law stuff?” Derek was beginning to like this guy, at least for the entertainment value. He continued to engage Prescott in conversation while Dave slipped away to the restroom.

“There is a lot of money in this town,” Prescott spittled as he took a long sip off the top of his overpriced Manhattan.

“There is a lot of spending in this town,” Derek rebutted. “I doubt there is a lot of money being earned here. You have seen the local ruins of the last banking fiasco, correct? Or is it normal for pilates studios and home decor boutiques to have drive-through structures?”

Prescott turned towards his drink, muttering. His demeanor had soured, but the ego was regaining traction. Dave returned giving Derek an opportunity to turn away from Prescott. With as much mental telepathy as he thought he could create, Derek gave Dave a do-not-engage warning stare. Dave was content to be uninterested.

Prescott’s alcohol-induced irritation found a new victim in the bartender, who was trying her best to avoid him. He waved her over, asking for the tab. With a whip of her hand, she immediately produced it from her apron. Prescott leaned into the bill, writing furiously. He petulantly tossed the pen on the bar, stood up and stomped out.

Derek reached over to read what Prescott had written. *You are a useless bitch. I am not coming here anymore. Tell Andrew I said so.* The tip line said ‘ZERO’.

“Fucker actually wrote out ‘ZERO’,” Derek muttered. “I’ll be right back. Pay up and stay

here for a minute,” Derek said as he slid off his stool. He pushed through a side door in pursuit. “Hey, Pres-kitt. You misspelled ‘Fifty’ on the tip line,” he said mockingly.

“Fuck that bitch and fuck you,” Prescott managed to get out as he leaned smugly against his Audi. “What are you going to do about it, fag?”

“Fag? Who still uses that word? What decade is this? How about I kick your fat ass?” Derek replied. With that, Prescott stepped forward, throwing a drunken haymaker swing. As the fist passed Derek’s head like a low-orbit satellite, the momentum spun Prescott toward the hood of his car. With a lightning quick motion, Derek pulled one of Prescott’s hands behind his back and slammed his face down on the hood with everything he had. Blood spurted immediately, imprinting Prescott’s facial features in red against the white of the car; his knees gave out. Derek reached down to pull Prescott’s wallet out of his back pocket, relieving it of cash. As he dropped the wallet, scattering its contents onto the ground, he restrained himself from finishing Prescott off with a punt to the head.

“That’s one for me, zero for Vero,” he laughed as he quickly went to retrieve Dave. Slamming the cash on the bar, he looked up to see tears descending the bartender’s face as she read the receipt, “Prescott says sorry. And don’t worry about Andrew.” He grabbed Dave by the arm tugging him towards the back door opposite a scene gathering around the bleeding and moaning prestigious corporate attorney.

“Get on the plane. You two need to get out of here for a few weeks at the very least,” Duncan announced. His irritation with Derek and anxiety over Dave’s run-in with the local police was starting to ease, but Paul was right. They needed to get out of Vero Beach for a while. The Gulfstream was ready to be pulled out of the hangar as they stepped on board.

As they taxied, Dave felt unsettled. He had no roots left. Reality was staring at him in the face; his life was shattered. That is how he thought of it. Shattered by a continuous string of circumstances. Shattered by the actions of other people and his willingness to do what he thought was the right thing by them. All it seemed to bring him was punishment and more problems. He looked over at Derek as the plane rotated, searching for reassurance.

“You alright, buddy?” Derek asked. Dave shook his head. “Don’t worry. This plane seems safe. We probably won’t crash.”

“This is starting to get complicated,” Paul warned Duncan.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Duncan asked hesitantly

“It’s your call. You and your guys have the money. I just hope I can hold up my end,” Paul replied.

“What is your end?” Duncan asked.

“Legal and how to bypass it. Are you getting too old for this? Are you sure you don’t want to just fart around playing astronaut with your other billionaire buddies?” Paul replied.

"I am certainly too old for that, and I don't have any billionaire buddies," Duncan laughed. "This idea of yours. What did you call it? Justice in lieu of law? Sounds like vigilantism."

"Something like that," Paul replied. "We got that done here with Mark. As you know, Dave was the trigger man. How is he?"

"He is a mess but he's been a relatively quiet mess," Duncan replied. "That wife of his damaged him; and for some reason, he is acting like he wants her back."

"That's normal man shit. Just get him laid. That fixes almost everything," Paul replied. "If that doesn't work, we'll keep him occupied doing something useful. Derek will help him. Remind me what he did for a living?"

"He was a Headhunter. He tells people he was a Consultant. That is mostly true," Duncan offered. "He was really good, but his business required guys like me who make decisions, not a bunch of corporate types scared of their HR departments. His business caved in on itself and he wound up here in Vero Beach to be near his kids. What did you two talk about? Anything of substance?"

"I ran a brief description by him outlining the plan," Paul replied. "He seemed interested enough to quit his job. Can he do what we need him to when things get ugly?"

"Given the right circumstances applied to the right villain, he could exact justice on almost anyone," Duncan assured Paul. "Derek would throw himself into the fire for anyone he thought was being oppressed."

"That's what we want," Paul replied. "If my suspicion is correct, this Miguel guy is up to something. To what, is still unknown. Is Kate still dating him?"

"Utterly in love," Duncan sighed.

"She might need therapy after this," Paul warned.

The plane descended towards runway 19 Right. As it taxied to a stop on the ramp, a black car pulled up. The pilot stepped out of the cockpit, giving them the nod that they could deplane and pointing to the car. The trunk popped open; they each dropped in a small bag they had hurriedly packed. Sliding into the opposite sides of the backseat, they were greeted by a thin, curly-haired driver.

"One of you guys needs to be in front," said the man. "I am not a taxi." Derek motioned for Dave.

"Who are you?" Derek asked, "and where are we going?"

"I am Dominic, and we are going to La Jolla," the man replied.

"Wait, where are we?" Dave asked. "This doesn't look like San Diego."

"It's not," Dominic replied. "This is Orange County. We have at least an hour and a half drive."

"Ok," Derek submitted, slipping further down into his seat before nodding off.

Dave tried to engage Dominic in conversation. For whatever reason, Dominic didn't want to

talk; he had no idea why. Maybe he *was* just their driver. Whoever he was, he wasn't someone who seemed to enjoy chitchat. Dave relented to stare out the window and think about his life. It nagged at him. He knew he had to find some way to break out of the misery. He needed something or someone to distract him. Maybe Derek was right on the plane. He needed another woman to distract him, fall in love with her, have her dump him and repeat the process until it just hurt less and less. To become immune to rejection or too exhausted to care. *Could I be like that?* he wondered. Derek seemed to be except for the Colorado girl. He said little about her, but the look in his eyes didn't lie.

The sun had set as they pulled into the garage of a small but nicely kept house. Derek stepped out, stretching like he had been on a multi-day bus ride. "Where are we?" he asked.

"This is my place," Dominic answered. "Come on in."

Derek followed on Dominic's heels while Dave lagged behind, taking in the house. It was nice. It was obviously inhabited by a man but thoughtfully decorated. There was no gaming chair or walls of big screen TVs as he expected. He and Mark had built a custom home for a very wealthy kid who had to be prodded by his mother to buy furniture. It was funny and a little sad, but relatable at the time. Jessica had been appalled. Dave was certain she had contacted the young man's mother forcing him into an effort to appear mature and socially adept.

Dominic fell into a chair, motioning for them to do the same. "Ok, guys, you are going to hang out here for a few weeks while your assault," pointing to Derek, "and your tail goes away," pointing at Dave.

"Tail? What tail?" Dave asked.

"The cop that pulled you over. We think he was put on to you by Mr. Aguilar," Dominic replied.

"Aguilar? Is that Miguel? How would he know I was following him?" Dave asked.

"It seems as though the cop was aware of you tailing Miguel and therefore aided and abetted in Miguel's escape from you," Dominic explained. "That's what I could assume from the data. No point worrying about it now. Go get some sleep if you are tired. There are two bedrooms at the end of the hall made up for you and food in the fridge if you're hungry. We'll talk about it tomorrow. I really need to finish up some work and it's late for you east coast guys."

"Good morning," Dominic said cheerfully as Derek walked into the kitchen fresh from a round of pushups and leg lifts. "Coffee?" Dominic gestured to the pour-over pot on the counter.

"Yeah, thanks," Derek replied, taking a sip, "Man, that's good."

"Only way to make it," Dominic said as he looked up from his laptop. "Hey Dave, get some coffee and both you guys go put on the simplest shirt you have and comb your hair." Dave gave him a wondering glance as he turned back towards the bedroom. With both men assembled and the indolence of the morning shaken off, Dominic stood them in front of a green screen to take their photos. They watched as he typed something fiercely then clicked 'send'. "Off to Paul."

“What’s that?” Dave asked.

“That is for your new IDs. We are making you guys Brazilian. You speak Portuguese, right Derek?”

“Falo,” Derek replied. “Suficiente.”

“I don’t speak Portuguese,” Dave complained.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dominic reassured him. “If you ever need to, just act dumb.”

“Are you calling Brazilians dumb?” Derek exclaimed.

“Definitely not,” Dominic replied. “I am saying the best and smartest thing you can do sometimes is act dumb. Stupid is endearing if you do it right. Nonetheless, you guys are going to be unofficial, undocumented Brazilians with documents. You will have your Driver’s Licenses, Green Cards and Socials in a day or two.”

“Where does Paul get these things?” Dave asked.

Dominic hesitated, thinking whether to tell them but it was something anyone could figure out if they wanted. “He has a guy do it for him; a client he was able to get a reduced sentence for. The guy produces these things with a printer Paul helped him procure. He has a soft spot for Mexicans.”

“He has a soft spot for Mexican women,” Dave interjected. Dominic laughed. It was true. Paul’s legal ethics were exceedingly more flexible when it came to the pursuit of very good-looking Mexican women.

“What happens if we get arrested?” Derek asked.

“Call your Attorney,” Dominic replied, “and try to speak as little as possible or speak in Portuguese. What is it, Abogado?”

“Advogado,” Derek corrected him. “What you said is ‘lawyer’ in Spanish. I doubt many of the Vero cops speak Portuguese, but there has be at least one.”

“You’re probably right,” Dominic agreed. “I finished up the next line of our defense last night. Let me show you.” Dominic spun his laptop around to demonstrate. The screen had a map of Vero Beach with little blue dots moving around, some sitting still.

“What are those?” Dave asked.

“Those are known cops,” Dominic replied. “I am still working on data collection, but by the time you guys get back to Florida, this thing should be at least 95% reliable.”

Dominic held up his finger to quiet Derek before he could ask the inevitable questions. “Call it AI programming if you want,” he said. “I am not sure how intelligent it is. I do this for retail marketing departments. Although, they don’t use all the data capability I am using here. They use it to discern the time and frequency a customer goes in and out of their stores, which aisles they tend to go down most, their purchasing tracked through the rewards programs, the payment method they use the most and a bunch of other metrics. It all works using their cell phones either voluntarily through apps and reward programs or through a series of identifiers I made for them. Marketing has become monitoring. And the thing I made creates a habit profile of their customers because people are very habitual. I just tweaked it for cops.”

Dominic could see the wheels churning in Dave and Derek's heads. He stood back and let them watch the cop show for a few minutes while refilling their coffees. It was magnificent, simple and effective for someone wanting to avoid law enforcement.

"Look at this one," he said as he zoomed in on a dot sitting still near the highway. It came to life, moving south on I-95 finally coming to a quick stop along the road behind a new dot that lit up. "Someone with a cell phone just got pulled over," he laughed. "The untracked ones only show up when they have been engaged by a cop.

"Ok, before you ask, I'll just tell you. Cops have cell phones. They all have cell phones, and they screw around with them at work like everyone else. They also go to work at police stations, tend to drive furtively and erratically at times, stand around at concerts and do other various human cop stuff. I just take these things they do and create a program that makes an assumption that these cell phones doing this stuff are cops instead of pantyhose shoppers. And voila." Dominic laughed.

"That is brilliant," Derek exclaimed, "and how do you get the cell numbers?"

"I buy the data from the carriers. If that doesn't work, I have my sources who can let me in the backdoor," Dominic explained. "Through the normal channel they won't give me the names of the people, but I have a bot cruising around the internet all the time looking for phone numbers attached to people, and those people are sometimes cops who get into news articles and receive awards and other crap they have to post on the internet. Honestly, most of these guys seem to post themselves because they think they look good in uniform. I pull their names off social media and make a list. Then, I associate that list with the phone number. If they responded to a scene and it gets on the internet through the news or whatever, the programming goes back in time, looks at the photos, identifies the cop and saves his photo. They also own houses and drive their cop cars home. That makes it really easy, thanks to county property records. And this is the guy who was tailing you, Dave..." Dominic pulled a photo out of a manila folder, slamming it triumphantly down in front of Dave, "Vero Beach's finest Officer Marco Sandoval."

"That's him," Dave confirmed.

They passed the next few days in La Jolla at the beach, running and working out. For Dave, it was good to feel free from the confines of Duncan's estate. Dominic left them to themselves, only warning them to mind their manners and not get arrested. On a beautiful Southern California afternoon they strode into the house refreshed from a run to find an opened FedEx envelope on the table. Sitting on the envelope were Green Cards for João and Benison Abreu.

"What is this?" Dave asked. "Is that me? How do I pronounce this?"

"Jo ah ooh," Derek explained, trying not to laugh as Dave slaughtered the Portuguese name for John. "Try it more nasally."

"This would be better in Spanish," Dave lamented.

"It would be more common," Derek corrected. "Besides, maybe you can land yourself a Brazilian girlfriend who will teach you the important things you will never learn from a gringa."

“What do I need to learn?” Dave contested.

“More than you can imagine, buddy,” Derek laughed. “You have an idea about women I wish I still had and I wish were true. Maybe you can find that in Brazil, but I doubt it. At their core, they’re also women. Just Brazilian. But in comparison to us, they are unique.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Dave replied with a smile. He was beginning to see Derek differently. He wasn’t a misogynist. He was something else. What it was wasn’t clear.

CHAPTER 8

Chez Laurent was about as good as it got for fine dining in Vero Beach. It was set apart from the nauseating, extensive collection of restaurants and bars, all vying to be unique while achieving paradoxical similarity. The majority had lines of snowbirds processed quickly through the hostess station to a table before their hips gave out. Speed-to-seat was more important than culinary standards. With low standard demands, there wasn't enough sophisticated pretense to justify the development of better restaurants. Chez Laurent was the risen cream while the rest of the town did its best to make banality excessively expensive, equating price with an illusion of quality. It was another facet of the Zero of Vero everyone seemed to tolerate.

Miguel refused to meet Kate at a restaurant bar and wait to be seated. It had become a ritual for her friends to join her as she waited for him to leave work. Barely warmed up in conversation, Miguel arrived unusually early. He was socially pleasant and handsome, keeping Kate on guard against other women. Her friends were, after all, women and known to have snatched away boyfriends in the past. She was not allowing it this time, for this man. At twenty-seven, she was old enough to know what she wanted. Following her instincts, she stood up to hug him and take a firm grip on his hand.

"Hello," Miguel smiled. "Have you been nice to Kate?"

"Hi," they replied almost in unison. Kate's friend Courtney gave a synopsis of their conversation up until his arrival while Miguel eye's searched for the *Maître d'*. Catching his glance, he signaled to be seated and rescued from further societal pleasantries. They were quickly led away from the women still trying to talk to Kate as she lagged behind.

Miguel was unusually quiet as they sat listening to the rehearsed specials. As the waiter took

a breath, Miguel put up his hand to end the monologue. "A bottle of the Tuscan Merlot," he ordered. He looked back at his menu, assuming Kate's approval.

"Excellent choice, sir," the waiter replied as he backed away a step, his head slightly tipped downward in submission, before turning on his heels to leave.

"Are you OK, baby?" Kate asked.

"We lost one of our guys today," he explained.

"Lost?" Kate asked. Miguel gave her the grim look of bad news. "Do you want to go?" Kate asked. "We can have something at my place," her face showing concern. She bit her lower lip slightly as if to pause before asking what had happened.

Miguel leaned forward to tell her, looking around for potential ears. "He just didn't show up. We thought he may have been illegal and picked up by Immigration. Then about three hours ago, we heard that he had been found along a road pretty beat up. He died from his injuries at the E.R. before he could tell anyone what happened."

"Who would do that?" she exclaimed, quickly calming herself as she became aware of the other people around them.

"There are plenty of people who would," Miguel explained. "The cartel, maybe."

"What cartel? Here?" Kate seemed incredulous that the cartel, or any cartel, could exist in Vero Beach. "I mean, I heard that the airport used to have some drugs flown in but everyone says that was taken care of a long time ago."

"For the most part, it was, but traffickers don't give up on markets entirely," Miguel replied. Kate gave him a confused look. "For the most part," he repeated. "There was a crack-down on the airport about the same time the Navy and Coast Guard were putting pressure on Colombian cocaine being smuggled in through The Keys. That's what helped the Mexican cartels become more powerful. Why bother with a bunch of islands and airports when you have almost 2,000 miles of border to smuggle across? Florida has many places to boat or fly in drugs, but it only has one way to go from there. North. Trafficking is logistics. The only reason it became an import area long ago was because it was easy. Both the DEA and the smugglers got smarter but the smugglers have businesses and the Feds have jobs and retirement plans. Who do you think really got smarter?"

He sat back to let her ponder as the waiter arrived to pour their wine. Miguel gestured to be left alone for a few more minutes while they read the menu.

"You think he was dealing drugs while he worked for you?" Kate asked.

"Possibly," Miguel replied, "you never know what these guys are into. His paperwork was all checked out. Had a Green Card." *That should keep her occupied for a while*, he thought, *Give her something to think about*. She would forget soon enough. Kate was a spoiled, rich girl whose preoccupations were dedicated to appearances and comfort. He was doing his best to continue spoiling her, but he needed her out of his business. She had been a little too interested the last few weeks. So was her Uncle. The old man was probably just interested in the business because

he thought he knew how to run everything. Old businessmen were like that, always looking for an ear to reminisce and a past to feel validated.

"Wow, wait," Kate asked between sips, leaning forward to be discreet, making it obvious they were talking about something private. "You think the cartel is still here?" she asked in almost a whisper.

"Maybe," Miguel replied. "Like I said, they don't like to give up markets."

"But the cocaine people were Colombians, right?" she asked, "Aren't the new cartel people Mexican?"

"I guess, but I think cocaine comes from Columbia or maybe Peru," Miguel replied innocently. "It probably stops off in Mexico to be smuggled in from there. It's not just cocaine they are trafficking." He knew very well who the cartel were and how narcotics entered the United States. Giving Kate the example of cocaine was easier for her to relate to. Although she stayed away from drugs, many of her acquaintances proudly bent the knee to the powder. Miguel signaled to drop the conversation as the waiter returned. They placed their order before Kate stood up to go to the restroom. As she rounded the corner out of sight, he slid the phone on to the table to text, *Dead. Confirm?*

Dead, came the reply.

Did he talk?

Nothing we know of. Was tailed by the usual.

Someone in his family needs to pay his debt. Get someone new, and don't fuck this up again. Find out how he got to the hospital. That was a huge fuck up.

We are on it Jefe. Sorry.

He slid his phone back into his pocket, expecting Kate to return. Sipping his wine, he reminded himself to relax and act like the name he used for his clients, 'Typicals'. The typical gringos. The typical upper-middle-class idiots who worked themselves silly to leverage a lifestyle they used for the show. *What the fuck do these idiots do that they can't mow their own lawns?* he wondered. Whatever it was, he didn't care. Running a gardening business with trafficked workers was profitable. He was out of the day-to-day drug business, taking only his cut for higher-level management the others were incapable of. For now, the DEA seemed occupied with other things leaving the legacy drug business alone. ICE was malleable when he needed them. The local cops were occupied trying to make headlines busting small-time dealers or their attention was purchased. It seemed like half of them were on his personal security force. It wasn't half, but there were enough. And Kate, he liked her. She was hot enough but what did that matter? She was replaceable. The more she believed they were monogamous, the better things would be for him. It was good PR to date a billionaire's niece and could have future benefits. It leaned towards credibility.

"Dude, it's five. Let's go down to that bar on the corner and talk up some women," Derek suggested. "It'll be good practice for you. You can be Dave."

"I'm Jo ah ooh," Dave replied as he distinctly pronounced the three syllables of his Brazilian name in a broken, staccato enunciation.

"You are not João. Not yet but there's potential," Derek laughed. "Let's go."

They walked the few blocks to a trendy local hangout behind a couple of young professional men in suits. *Lawyers*, Dave thought. The place was about half full, but from the antsy demeanor of the hostess, it seemed like it would fill up soon. Derek led the way to the corner of the bar motioning for Dave to occupy the seat facing the length of it.

"You don't want to face the crowd? Don't you feel paranoid when your back is to everything?" Dave asked. He was more than willing to give up his view of the bar and face the racks of spirits.

"There's a mirror," Derek replied, pointing to the field of view reflecting in it. "I can see enough. Besides, chicks who go to the bar together seem to like those small, protective high tables where they make you swim up like it's an island and you just crashed your plane off shore. You crawl up the beach to be met by a tribe of cannibals, not a lust pack looking for your seed and someone to exalt."

Dave paused, letting the island description fade. "You don't care? Why are we here?" he asked. "I thought we were going to 'talk up some women' like you said." Dave had the feeling that Derek's strategy was to get out of Dominic's house for a while, baiting him with potential diversions.

"You meet women when they want to meet you, Dave," Derek explained. "I am not opposed to walking up to a woman cold but, in my opinion, you are better off knowing their attraction signals than trying to force something out of thin air. It's more natural, less awkward and she thinks it's her idea."

"I thought approaching women was a thing. Like some sort of rehearsed art form," Dave said.

"It is but they let you know," Derek replied to a confused Dave. "Women will always give you a sign they find you safe at the minimum and attractive enough to sleep with at best. They will do this immediately. If they don't, you are more than likely invisible to them. Move along. Anything you do to change that means you are chasing and chasing is a waste of your time. But there is also the strategy of being around. Like in small social circles where you can exhibit competence. That takes consistent mental fortitude or, in most cases, nothing else to do. Most of time, the best thing to do is to do your thing and let them show up."

"I sort of chased my wife," Dave recalled.

Derek looked at Dave in a way a father looks at his kid who knows he said or did something wrong. Sternly but patiently waiting for the kid to come around. As Dave's eyes widened in response to the realization flowing through him, Derek could feel a new surge of potential. Dave wasn't lost to a stubborn, defensive ego like a lot of the men he knew. He was smart, but there were still petrified layers of conditioning and willful ignorance to chisel through.

A pretty blond slid up to the bar next to Dave. He turned towards her briefly enough for her

to say, "Hi." Dave responded, turning away from Derek to face her. They spoke while the bartender poured her wine. Once she had it in hand, she patted Dave on the shoulder and returned to her friends at the small, high table they inhabited.

"Huh," Dave said with a smile. She seemed nice.

"Yeah," Derek agreed without a hint of emotion.

"You don't think she was nice?" Dave contested.

"She was pleasant. Most people are relatively pleasant especially when your personal space is overlapping. It's how society works to keep us from kicking each other's asses all the time. Right now, you are conflating *pleasantly social* to her being *into you*. Maybe possibly, if you had another chance to talk to her, blah, blah, blah," Derek replied.

"No, I'm not," Dave denied.

"You were. It's OK. She is one of millions of women," Derek eased his response.

"I could go talk to her," Dave defended.

"You already signaled your interested when you turned towards her. You think you could walk up to her and her friends based on that conversation with nothing more?" Derek asked.

"Yes!" Dave exclaimed.

"Fuck me, I have to see this. Go!" Derek challenged giving Dave a little shove.

"Fine, I am going," Dave stood up, determined and confident, he started to walk toward the woman who adjusted her body language as he approached. He continued to walk past her straight to the restroom. When he returned, Derek was quietly laughing to himself.

"Thank God you have some sense to pull up when you are about to crash and burn. Good job fighting your ego with your feet," Derek laughed. "She's not into you. At least not right now."

"That's obvious," Dave relented. "I just kept going like you said, fighting my ego with my feet. Nothing. Not into me at all. She didn't even look up as I passed. Is this what single life is going to be like?"

"Yup, and it gets weirder. There's shit you can't even imagine at your age. What are you? About forty?" Derek asked.

"Thirty-eight," Dave replied.

"That's a good age to be. To be careful," Derek warned. "You pretty much have a dating pool between twenty and sixty, and in that pool, the women are nothing alike and everything alike. Because they are all chicks."

"They are not all the same," Dave contested.

"They are not individually the same, but they all have chick instincts. It's their motivations that will vary," Derek replied. "They are the female animal to our male animal. Remember watching animal shows when you were a kid? Did the female animals act like the males? Did the male animals desperately chase around the females? They did when the alpha male wasn't around. When he was present they either challenged him for his status or they calmly stepped away and submitted. The females were waiting around to see who won. We do something like that and you can see it when it's happening. Once you see it, it can't be unseen."

“What are you talking about?” Dave lamented.

“Mating, Dave. Mating rituals. We have them just like other species but in our own way. Instead of asses getting all puffed up and red when they’re ready, our females are more subtle in their mating signals. But they signal, sometimes loudly, and you signal your value to her through your words, your actions, and how she receives it in the *feelings* part of her brain.” Derek took a sip of his non-alcoholic beer, opening up space for Dave to respond.

“You think I could get her number?” Dave asked.

“Who? The blond?” Derek laughed. “Not today. I would let that one go. You’re too fixated. Not on her specifically but you are fixated on the win. You’re doubling down on getting somewhere just to get somewhere. Like a guy looking to score points.”

“Points for what?” Dave asked.

“You know, points. Attraction points. Men do this all the time. It’s like they calculate a potential lay price and work towards gaining enough lay points to get the lay. Dinner: 50 points. Flowers: 20 points. Texting her nice things: 5 points each. Texting her too much: negative points. When you first meet her and she gives you attention, you immediately assume she is into you, explain your fucking job with esoteric flamboyance and subtly, or not subtly, explain to her that this job will guarantee her survival and the survival of your future children: 85 points.

“You keep earning points until she meets your preconceived lay-award level. Call it 100 points for this part of the story. If you go whizzing past 100 points, you start to realize that it might not happen and you might be getting played. You are in purgatory between your waning patience and her manipulation. You might start bugging her to allow you to cash in your points which gets you more negative points. At 150 points, you might turn into a creepy stalker because you are so fixated on the lay point price being 100. Why won’t she relent? Then she says some shit like, ‘let’s be friends’ after you have invested time and resources into getting with her. You are back to zero points, where you will stay forever. You still think you have the accumulated points, but she has reduced you to the equivalence of being one of her girlfriends and no longer a romantic possibility.” Derek paused.

“Oh, and women seem to have their own point system which is where the friend-zone is. The idiot living there is unknowingly trying to reach her infinite point threshold. The other idiots are working towards a level of points fluctuating with her moods. If one of these fools gets to the right number, where he has waited and performed long enough, he wins the prize. That’s what the girls call ‘making him wait’. It’s like training your ass off for a race then coming in second and that satisfies you. It becomes your prize and you happily quit. It’s a stupid way to live, Dave. Let that fester around in your head for a while.”

“Do you think men and women can be friends?” Dave asked.

“They can,” Derek replied. “It helps if she is hideous, entertaining in some way and you have no physical attraction to her. Or maybe you have so many options that having female friends is a condition of your social circumstances. What I am talking about is reverting to friendship when you are into her just to keep her in your life. You know, staying friends at her request while you

think she is a potential romantic possibility and you just have to ride it out. That's sad and desperate. It broadcasts your lack of options. You just gave her permission to cry to you about her future, shitty boyfriends while you sit there listening, thinking you are the magic remedy for her bad decisions." Derek stared impatiently at Dave. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

As they left, a pretty woman seated with Dave's blond made eye contact and smiled at Derek. Waiting at the door, Dave watched Derek talk to her briefly. Within a minute, he handed her his phone. She keyed in something and handed it back. With that Derek smiled, gave her a fist bump and walked straight out the door past Dave.

"What was that?" Dave asked.

"She gave me her number," Derek grinned, holding up his phone.

"What? How?" Dave pled.

"She gave the signal. I responded," Derek replied.

"Straight to 80 points," Dave sighed.

"I don't need points, Dave." Derek laughed.

CHAPTER 9

“I got them to the plane about an hour ago.”

“Thank you, Dominic,” Duncan replied. “Were you able to extract what you needed from Kate’s phone?”

“I got the whole thing, texts, contacts, emails, everything.”

“We won’t need much, right?” Duncan asked.

“I glanced through it and ran some software I developed to find keywords and phrases. I also added all of her saved cell numbers to the monitor program. Not much came up except for one curious item,” he hesitated, hoping to avoid delving into Kate’s personal life.

“Just spit it out. What curious item?” Duncan implored.

“It seems like one of her friends spends a lot of time with Miguel,” Dominic revealed.

“Which one?” asked Duncan.

“Her name is Courtney.”

“Ok, we will keep that to ourselves. Maybe I’ll have Dave and Derek check up on her after they get back from Colorado,” Duncan replied.

The Gulfstream turned for its final approach into Rocky Mountain Metro. Derek stretched out. His thoughts were tracing the few months of change in his life; how his path had veered towards a completely different direction than his expectations haphazardly tried to force. His shit show parade of a life, consisting of one bad circumstance after another, seemed to be coming to a close. Nothing he tried put him anywhere near the past when he had everything a normal, working father and husband wanted. It was one dilemma after another, leaving him feeling hopelessly replaceable. Even his relationships with new women he liked had suffered. It didn’t matter

how much he liked a woman or how much fun they had together. Once she realized she was with a man who seemed to have bad luck, she opted out like it was contagious and permanent.

But things were turning around, it was incredible that he could do a little work for a nice older man ten years previous, not speak for years, then wind up in a clandestine organization formed with no defined purpose other than following around a boyfriend. And getting paid for it. Although he had yet to get paid. *Are all people with money this petty about controlling their families?* he wondered. *Is that what this is with the niece?*

Not only was he technically unemployed, but he had received word that his driver's license was about to be suspended because some busybody county government employee could not read and interpret his court-ordered garnishment. *Monica Del Valle, total idiot*, he thought. Another bullshit thing he had to deal with. The garnishment was a moot point. He quit the job that was supposed to pay it. *What can I do to pay the child support and look legit?* he thought as the plane came to a stop near a hangar. It was a pressing topic to bring up with Duncan. Although he hated the insidious way his ex-wife alienated him from his daughters, she needed the money. It was his duty to pay her, regardless of the little time he got with the girls. Paul came into view through the window, waving from inside the hangar. He would know what to do.

"Dave," Paul smiled, holding his arms wide to hug his friend. "Welcome back. Did you miss it?"

"Have I ever," Dave sighed. "It's good to see you and breath this air."

"Come on, you two, let's get up to the ranch," Paul said as he led them to the car. He studied Derek a moment before opening the car door.

They began the 30-mile drive with Dave recapping his impressions of Florida and California. Derek interrupted every so often to recall his memories from the back seat. It was impossible to hear his voice and think he wasn't conflicted. As they passed through Boulder, Derek looked more melancholy with every stoplight.

"What's the problem?" Paul asked.

"Duncan was able to get my mail and forward it to California. This woman in Child Services is getting my Colorado license suspended. It's the only tangible thing I have left from here. And now I sort of have a job, whatever this thing is, but no cash flow to pay the support," Derek lamented. "Do we have a solution for that? I appreciate this opportunity, but I need to have some income."

Paul stared out the window in thought for a moment. "Duncan has been covering all of your day-to-day living expenses, but I understand the problem. You need to appear more legit. I'll set up a shell company. You guys will be house painters. You'll never have to paint. You'll just collect the normal amount a painting company should every week. I'll have my assistant make up invoices, billings, etc, and buy paint and supplies so it looks real. We'll get an account with a local paint store and stick the paint in a storage facility then sell it later, if ever. We can probably

run this temporarily until we get through this boyfriend problem with Kate. Then we'll reassess and I will come up with something else."

"How do you think up this stuff so fast?" Dave asked.

"Experience and defending the right kind of clients, Dave," Paul replied with the best evil grin he could derive. "Is this county woman Monica Del Valle?"

"That's her. Know her?" Derek asked.

"Oh yeah, she has been a pain in the ass for a few of my clients," Paul replied. "I am getting a little irritated and have a plan to mess with her. I wonder how many ex-husbands her letters have been the final blow."

"Final blow?" Dave asked.

"Receiving her letter and ending yourself before you realize it was nothing you couldn't handle in a better frame of mind," Paul replied grimly. "Regardless of the fact that she is part of the wider problem, I would guess her incompetence has been complicit in at least a few suicides. I'll deal with her in the way I know best. Impersonally and justly."

"Impersonally?" Dave asked.

"Impersonally because when someone does their job as a drone of a system and brandishes that system's power it does not exclude nor insulate their soul from morality, ethics and justice," Paul replied. "You are human not a job."

They drove the final few miles to Lefthand Canyon. Dave and Derek were tranquilized by the scenery. Florida had nothing in comparison. Everything was nearly at eye level, giving it a two-dimensional feel. At best, Florida was a painting. Colorado was sculpture. They turned off the road at an automated gate driving up a steep mountain road through an open field then into the aromatic stands of ponderosa pines. Dave knew the property well, better than Paul.

"Dave," Paul interjected into the quiet, "I added some new things recently. There're more shipping containers and they are habitable."

"Really? Like tiny houses?" Dave asked.

"Yes, and off-grid completely. The only thing I need anyone up here for is putting propane into the big tank. The one that has survived all of the fires. And someone to clean out the septic tank."

"You got a permit from the county for a septic tank?" Dave asked.

"There was the old one my father had. We just revamped it. County doesn't know it's there and I am keeping it that way," Paul replied. "You and Mark left me with enough subcontractor contacts to get anything I need done without permits. Cash and quiet are King and Realm, Dave."

Dave winced at the thought of bypassing the county. He and his brother-in-law Mark had always done construction through the proper permitting, but they built for other people. Paul built for Paul.

The SUV came to rest on a small, flat area peculiar to the surrounding hillside, cut into the

slope before the current generation of trees. In front of them, four dark green shipping containers appeared as though they were being used for nothing more than storage. Dave stepped out of the car, taking in the cool, pine-scented air. He was back.

"Uncle Dave!" he heard behind him. He turned, dropping to his knees to hug his two nieces who dove into his outstretched arms. The tears welled up after months of being away from his family with nothing to hold but memories. Behind the girls, his sister and Mark appeared.

"Why are you crying?" Becca, the youngest, asked as he stood up to embrace his sister. Mark stood back while Sarah looked her brother up and down like his mother had. Dave took Mark's arm, pulling him towards him into a brotherly hug.

"I can't believe what you guys did for me," Mark sighed. "You put yourselves into so much risk."

"You're out of jail. You are free. I didn't care about the risk," Dave replied.

"But it up-ended your life," Mark protested.

"My life was up-ended anyway once I knew what..." Dave paused before saying Jessica's name in front of the kids. He didn't know what they knew or had been told about their aunt. "It's OK. It's done," he finished abruptly.

"Come on," Sarah said, taking his hand to lead him to the shipping container. Paul opened the steel doors to reveal a glass slider leading to a small kitchen. As Dave stepped inside, the aroma of Sarah's cooking welcomed him. He was overwhelmed with the emotions he had suppressed, buried in a place he had tried to forget. The tears he shed were a long time coming. They were necessary.

The kids ran around through the trees as the sun was giving up its last rays to the east. Mark and Derek watched while Paul uncorked wine and poured Scotch. He was pleased with himself and the task he had designed for Dave. The time had finally come to celebrate the success of their plan to free Mark. Duncan's new involvement brought possibilities for greater things. Now when he concocted a plan, the resources he had at his disposal overwhelmed his imagination. He only had to sell it to the money and it would happen.

"I don't know, Courtney," Miguel protested as he slid out of bed. "I don't know when or if I can just dump Kate."

"But why not?" she whined. "She is going to find out."

"She had better not. I told you. At this point, I have no reason to get rid of her. You knew the deal when we got together. It's open on my end and on your end. Kate doesn't like that kind of thing and I want to keep her around. I have my reasons. Don't do something stupid and tell her about us or you will lose. I will replace both of you. Then what are you going to do?"

Courtney slammed her head back into the pillow, staring at the ceiling. She knew the deal. She hated the deal, but she knew it. When she needed money or someone, Miguel was there. The sex just happened one day. That was the rationalization. It just kept happening.

Miguel threw on his clothes, stopping to kiss her quickly before turning to leave. She listened

for the door to close, the sound of the deadbolt punctuating the end of another few hours spent with Miguel.

"I have some things to show you," Mark said as the kids helped Sarah clean up. "Come on. You too, Derek." They walked down the hill about fifty yards to another three shipping containers pushed together. Mark opened the door. The light revealed a well-equipped machine shop.

"Those are yours from your garage," Dave exclaimed.

"Yeah, Paul moved them up here while I was still in jail. Made it look like Sarah was giving up and selling off my stuff. He started on the day you left," Mark replied as he spun the dial on a safe in the corner. Mark leaned into the safe, pulling out two pistols resembling Glock 19s. Opening the chambers on both, he handed them to Derek and Dave.

"Wow," Dave exclaimed, "you did it. You made aluminum Glocks." Derek quietly studied the gun in his hand, his thumb releasing the slide with a pronounced slap as the spring slammed it forward. "You still had the parts?" Dave asked.

"I had them. Paul had some and we made the rest," Mark replied proudly. "Something new, that little button right there on the cover plate, full auto."

"Shit, you guys are relentless in your disregard for the law," Derek laughed. "Who does this? Especially now with the Firearm Storage Law."

"I would guess a lot of people," Mark replied. "When they did the initial search and seizure, we had a fair amount of firearms stashed in my house in a safe under the lawn." He went on to explain the hidden space he had built and how it was accessed. Paul had assured him that Derek was one of them and could be counted on. "The guns are all here now except for one of these I made for myself. With this shop, I can make more. I can 3D print polymer versions too. I just like the feel of aluminum."

"How did you make this receiver?" Derek asked.

"I made foam blanks then cast them up here with scrap aluminum I had around. Then I finished them up with the mill," Mark replied holding his hand out to take the gun from Derek. "There are suppressors I made for them too, plus a bunch of ammo. Getting the ammo is the problem, that's where Paul is most helpful. Somehow he can get brass, powder, primers and bullets. I don't want to know where or how he does it. Some of the stuff I made is subsonic. They are pretty quiet coming out the bad end but you need to be close."

"I like to call it the 'see you in fucking hell' end," Derek smiled.

"Hopefully, you won't need them," Mark said.

"What do you mean?" Dave asked.

"These are yours. Paul thought you might need them so I made one for you and Derek. That's all I want to know," Mark repeated. "I tested them both. Obviously, they aren't official Glocks, but they are Glocks. You don't need to test them. I have never had to test-fire a Glock in my life."

They just work right out of the box. These are no different even though they are technically a patent infringement. Pull the trigger if you have to. They work.”

Dave slept through the night better than he had in months. The effects of the elevation and Scotch could not defeat the ease he felt being around his family. Cold, dry mountain air seeped in through a crack in the window connecting him to the wild beauty outside unlike Florida air conditioning trying in vain to replicate it.

The morning sun put the birds into a frenzy. Wild turkeys roosting up the hill from the container house cursed the rays that warmed their wings. Dave slipped outside to relieve himself the way men enjoy most as a light breeze flowed down along the surface of the slope, moving east to greet the sun. About two hundred yards down the hill, a small herd of elk grazed between the trees. He felt content. One more day lazing around with Paul on the hillside was not enough, but there were things to do.

“What is going on with Miguel?” Duncan asked.

“He has been spending some time out at a farm west of town,” Dominic replied. “Looks like from the map it used to be a citrus farm. It has five long buildings, and you can sort of see where the trees were planted. Oddly, there seems to be a lot of cell phones on the property; two or three per building. The satellite views are a little older, but they show some gardening trucks and a bunch of vans.”

“That is probably his father’s old place. He mentioned something about it,” Duncan responded. “A small grapefruit farm. You said the phones are signaling from the buildings?”

“They are,” Dominic expanded the map view where he had the cell phone locations pinned. “Looks like they are in the buildings then leave around 5:00 and head for the island and some of the larger developments. What time is it there? About 8:00?”

“It is,” Duncan confirmed. “That must be where he keeps his trucks and congregates his employees for the day.”

“The historical records show the cells leaving early during the weekdays but I only have data that goes back about a month. I’ll set the program to track that area throughout the next few days to see if that looks like a pattern,” Dominic suggested. “It’s curious that all of his employees don’t seem to have phones and the images don’t show the employees’ cars lined up. Maybe it was taken on a weekend; I don’t have a date stamp. There have to be more people getting into the trucks, right? The trucks and the vans have one phone each, sometimes two. Maybe just for supervisors?”

“That is curious,” Duncan replied. “The guys will be back here later tomorrow. Why don’t you start strategizing where they might be able to sneak in there to have a look around? Can you detect cameras? Also, fences would be good to know about or dogs. Any dogs in the satellite photos?”

“None that I have seen,” Dominic replied. Dominic sensed that Duncan was getting anxious

to get some real information on Miguel. *Who cares*, he thought. The old man was overpaying him. Whatever the client wants. If he can provide it, he will. If not, he will figure out how.

A day well spent, Dave thought as he dropped into a recliner. Derek seemed restless after their hike. He was fine during Dave's tour of former hunting spots both on Paul's property and the government land surrounding it, but now there was something going on with him.

"OK, thanks," Dave heard Derek say from the other room. *He must be talking to Paul on the burner*, he thought to himself.

"Hey," Derek said as he came out of the bedroom, "I am going into town. You OK here alone for a while?"

"Which town, Boulder?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, I should be back before it's too late. Don't worry about me if I am not. Paul knows where I am going," Derek replied.

Dave shrugged off the impulse to ask what the secret was as Derek took the truck keys from the counter, stepping out without a word. There was something important going on. He slipped back into his book, content to be alone for a while.

Derek started the truck, pausing a moment as he convinced himself to shift it into Drive. "Just go," he said to himself. The butterflies in his stomach were desperately attempting to get him to turn around as he entered Boulder. Nearing downtown, he forced himself into a myopic get-it-done mode. He would do it. It had to be done. And right now, he had the opportunity. There was no failure in the outcome. It would be resolved, either way, today.

He parked near the Pearl Street Mall and walked onto the bricks for the first time in over a year. The cold shadow cast by the Continental Divide bit into him as he squinted against the last rays of sun. Office buildings began to empty their manicured and well-dressed occupants, seeking relief from a long day of work. Derek leaned against a slab of rock pretending to be a statue and waited. *This is destiny or idiocy*, he thought.

After what felt like an hour, the sun had given up and left him in the cold. This was unfinished business. It would have less meaning without suffering. It felt good to have his stomach knotted up; his nerves stretched tight like a bowstring. He assumed most people were smart enough to avoid these feelings in whatever way they could. Anxiety wasn't something he had the luxury to feel in the last year as he survived day-to-day on faith when he had run out of ideas. Every advantage and opportunity that popped up was the tiniest of miracles meant to see him through another day. There had been so many. He found it impossible to deny that something was keeping him alive for a purpose. If that something was God, he was ready for whatever came next. The anticipation he felt at this moment somehow lacked fear. The resolution he hoped for would free him either way.

The door of the building opened as three men in suits stepped out. The last one spinning to catch the door as it began to swing shut. She stopped, framed in the opening, as her surprised

eyes met his. The man's grip on the door held as the moment became timeless. Derek stepped forward, taking the door in his hand and her in the other. He said nothing as he pulled her to him. He could feel her breathing heavily as he held her. She held on to him.

