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# Or She Dies

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Extract

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SPHERE

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Nothing is foolproof to a sufficiently talented fool.

—*Anonymous*

*Navigating a hairpin turn, I gripped the steering wheel hard and did my best not to slide in the driver's seat. If the butcher knife tucked beneath the back of my thigh shifted, it would open up my leg. The blade was angled in, the handle sticking out toward the console, within easy reach. The acrid smell of burning rubber leaked in through the dashboard vents. I resisted the urge to flatten the gas pedal again; I couldn't risk getting pulled over, not given the deadline.*

*I flew up the narrow street, my hands slick on the wheel, my heart pumping so much fear and adrenaline through me that I couldn't catch my breath. I checked the clock, checked the road, checked the clock again. When I was only a few blocks away, I pulled the car to the curb, tires screeching. I shoved open my door just in time. As I retched into the gutter, a gardener watched me from behind a throttling lawn mower, his face unreadable.*

*I rocked back into place, wiped my mouth, and continued more slowly up the steep grade. I turned down the service road as directed, and within seconds the stone wall came into sight, then the iron gates that matched the familiar ones at the front. I hopped out and punched in the code. The gates shuddered and sucked inward. Hemmed in by jacaranda, the paved drive led straight back along the rear of the property. At last the guest quarters came into view. White stucco walls, low-pitched clay-tile roof, elevated porch – the guesthouse was bigger than most regular houses on our street.*

*I pulled up beside the cactus planter at the base of the stairs, tight to the building. Setting my hands on the steering wheel, I did my best to breathe. There were no signs of life. Way across the property, barely visible through a netting of branches, the main house*

*sat dark and silent. Sweat stung my eyes. The stairs just outside the driver's-side window were steep enough that I couldn't see up onto the porch. I couldn't see much of anything but the risers. I supposed that was the point.*

*I waited. And listened.*

*Finally I heard the creak of a door opening above. A footstep. Then another. Then a man's boot set down on the uppermost step in my range of vision. The right foot followed. His knees became visible, then his thighs, then waist. He was wearing scuffed worker jeans, a nondescript black belt, maybe a gray T-shirt.*

*I slid my right hand down to the hilt of the butcher knife and squeezed it so hard that my palm tingled. Warmth leaked into my mouth; I'd bitten my cheek.*

*He stopped on the bottom step, a foot from my window, the line of my car roof severing him at the midsection. I wanted to duck down so I could see his face, but I'd been warned not to. He was too close anyway.*

*His knuckle rose, tapped the glass once.*

*I pushed the button with my left hand. The window started to whir down. The knife blade felt cool hidden beneath my thigh. I picked out a spot on his chest, just below his ribs. But first I had to find out what I needed to know.*

*His other hand came swiftly into view and popped something fist-sized in through the open gap of the still-lowering window. Hitting my lap, it was surprisingly heavy.*

*I looked down.*

*A hand grenade.*

*I choked on my breath. I reached to grab it.*

*Before my splayed fingers could get there, it detonated.*

# Chapter 1

**Ten Days Earlier**

In my boxers I stepped out onto the cold flagstones of my porch to retrieve the morning paper, which had landed, inevitably, in the puddle by the broken sprinkler. The apartments across the street, Bel Air in zip code only, reflected the gray clouds in their windows and sliding glass doors, mirroring my mood. LA's winter had made a late entrance as always, slow to rise, shake off its hangover, and put on its face. But it had arrived, tamping the mercury down to the high forties and glazing the leased luxury sedans with dew.

I fished out the dripping paper, mercifully enclosed in plastic, and retreated back inside. Sinking again into the family-room couch, I freed the *Times* and pulled out the Entertainment section. As I unfolded it, a DVD in a clear case fell out, dropping into my lap.

I stared down at it for a moment. Turned it over. A blank, unmarked disc, the kind you buy in bulk to record onto. Bizarre. Even a touch ominous. I got up, knelt on the throw rug, and slipped the disc into the DVD player. Clicking off the surround sound so as not to wake Ariana, I sat on the floor and stared at the plasma screen, rashly purchased when our bank account was still on a northerly heading.

A few visual hiccups jerked the image, followed by a placid close-up shot of a window framed by plantation shutters, not quite closed. Through the window I could see a brushed-nickel towel rack and a rectangular pedestal sink. At the edge of the frame was an exterior wall, Cape Cod blue. The view took only a second to register – it was as familiar as my reflection, but, given the context, oddly foreign.

It was our downstairs bathroom, seen from outside, through the window.

A faint pulse came to life in the pit of my stomach. Apprehension.

The footage was grainy, looked like digital. The depth of field didn't show compression, so probably not a zoom. My guess was it had been taken a few feet back from the pane, just far enough not to pick up a reflection. The shot was static, maybe from a tripod. No audio, nothing but perfect silence razoring its way under the skin at the back of my neck. I was transfixed.

Through the window and the half-open bathroom door, a slice of hall was visible. A few seconds passed in a near freeze-frame. Then the door swung in. Me. I entered, visible from neck to knee, the shutters chopping me into slices. In my blue-and-white-striped boxers, I stepped to the toilet and took a leak, my back barely in view. A light bruise came into focus, high on my shoulder blade. I washed my hands at the sink, then brushed my teeth. I exited. The screen went black.

Watching myself, I'd bitten down on the inside of my cheek. Stupidly, I glanced down to determine what pair of boxers I had on today. Plaid flannel. I thought about that bruise; I'd banged my back standing up into an open cabinet door just last week. I was trying to recall which day I'd done it when I heard Ariana clanking around in the kitchen behind me, starting breakfast. Sound carries easily through the wide doorways of our fifties open-plan two-story.

The DVD's placement – tucked into the Entertainment section – struck me as deliberate and pointed. I clicked 'play,' watched again. A prank? But it wasn't funny. It wasn't much of anything. Except unsettling.

Still gnawing my cheek, I got up and trudged upstairs, past my office with the view of the Millers' much bigger yard, and into our bedroom. I checked my shoulder blade in the mirror – same bruise, same location, same size and color. In the back of the walk-in closet, I found the laundry basket. On the top of the mound were my blue-and-white-striped boxers.

Yesterday.

I dressed and then went down to the family room again. I pushed aside my blanket and pillow, sat on the couch, and started the DVD once more. Running time, a minute and forty-one seconds.

Even if it was just a tasteless joke, it was the last thing Ariana and I needed to deal with right now. I didn't want to upset her, but I also didn't want to withhold it from her.

Before I could work out what to do, she walked in carrying a breakfast tray. She was showered and dressed, a mariposa lily from her greenhouse shed tucked behind her left ear, the flower a striking contrast with the chestnut waves of hair. Instinctively, I clicked off the TV. Her gaze scanned over, picked up the green light on the DVD. Shifting her grip on the tray, she flicked her thumbnail against her gold wedding band, a nervous tic. 'What are you watching?'

'Just a thing from school,' I said. 'Nothing to worry about.'

'Why would I worry?'

A pause as I worked out what to say. I managed only a contrived shrug.

She tilted her head, indicating a thin scab across the knuckles of my left hand. 'What happened there, Patrick?'

'Caught it in the car door.'

'Treacherous door lately.' She set the tray down on the coffee table. Poached eggs, toast, orange juice. I paused to take her in. Caramel skin, the mane of almost-black hair, those big dark eyes. At thirty-five, she had a year on me, but her genes kept her looking at least a few younger. Despite her upbringing in the Valley, she was a Mediterranean mutt – Greek, Italian, Spanish, even a little Turkish thrown in the mix. The best parts of each ethnicity had been distilled into her features. At least that's how I'd always seen her. When I looked at her, my mind drifted to how things used to be between us – my hand on her knee as we ate, the warmth of her cheek when she awakened, her head resting in the crook of my arm at the movies. My anger toward her started to weaken, so I focused on the blank screen.

'Thanks,' I said, nodding at the breakfast tray. My low-grade detective work had already put me ten minutes behind schedule. The edginess I was feeling must have been evident, because she gave a frown before withdrawing.

Leaving the food untouched, I got up from the couch and stepped out the front door again. I circled the house to the side facing the Millers'. Of course the wet grass beneath the window showed no marks or matting, and the perp had forgotten to drop a helpful matchbook, cigarette butt, or too-small glove. I sidestepped until I got the perspective right. A sense of foreboding overtook me, and I glanced over one shoulder, then the other, unable to settle my nerves. Gazing back through the slats, I felt a surreal spasm and half expected to watch myself enter the bathroom again, a time warp in striped boxers.

Instead Ariana appeared in the bathroom doorframe, looking out at me. *What are you doing*? she mouthed.

The ache in my bruised knuckles told me my hands were clenched. I exhaled, relaxed them. 'Just checking the fence. It's sagging.' I pointed at it like an idiot. See, there. Fence.

Smirking, she palmed the slats closed as she set down the toilet seat.

I walked back into the house, returned to the couch, and watched the DVD through a third time. Then I removed the disc and stared at the etched logo. It was the same cheap kind I used to burn shows from TiVo when I wanted to watch them downstairs. Purposefully nondescript.

Ariana passed through, regarded the untouched food on the tray. 'I promise I didn't poison it.'

Grudgingly, I smiled. When I looked up, she'd already headed for the stairs.

I tossed the DVD into the passenger seat of my beat-up Camry and stood by the open door, listening to the quiet of the garage.

I used to love this house. It was at the summit of Roscomare Road near Mulholland, barely affordable and only because it shared the block with those cracked-stucco apartments and a neighborhood shopping strip. Our side of the street was all houses, and we liked to pretend we lived in a neighborhood rather than on a thoroughfare between neighborhoods. I'd had so much pride in the place when we'd moved in. I'd bought new address numbers, repaired the porch light, torn out the spinsterly rosebushes. Everything done with such care, such optimism.

The sound of steadily passing cars filtered into the dark space around me. I clicked the button to open the garage door and sneaked under it as it rose. Then I circled back through the side gate and past the trash cans. The window overlooking the kitchen sink gave a clear view of the family room, and of Ariana sitting on the arm of the couch. Steam wisped from the coffee mug resting on her pajamaed knee. She held it dutifully, but I knew she wouldn't drink it. She'd cry until it got cold, and then she'd pour it down the sink. I stood nailed to the ground as always, knowing

I ought to go in to her but blocked by what little remaining pride I had left. My wife of eleven years, inside, crying. And me out here, lost in a haze of silent devastation. After a moment I eased away from the window. The bizarre DVD had pushed my vulnerability up another notch. I didn't have it in me to punish myself by watching her, not this morning.

# Chapter 2

For me, growing up, there was nothing like the movies. A dilapidated theater within biking distance had second-run matinees for $2.25. As an eight-year-old, I paid in quarters I earned collecting soda cans for recycling. Saturdays the theater was my classroom, Sundays my temple. *Tron, Young Guns, Lethal Weapon* – through the years those movies were my playmates, my baby-sitters, my mentors. Sitting in the flickering dark, I could be any character I wanted, anyone other than Patrick Davis, a boring kid from the suburbs of Boston. Every time I watched the creative credits roll by, I couldn't believe that those names belonged to real people. How lucky they were.

Not that movies were *all* I thought about. I played baseball, too, which made my father proud, and I read a lot, which pleased my mom. But most of my childhood daydreams were celluloid-induced. Whether I was hitting fly balls and thinking of *The Natural* or pedaling my Schwinn ten-speed and praying I'd lift off like in *E.T.*, I owe the movies for imbuing my rather ordinary childhood with a sense of wide-eyed wonder.

*Follow Your Dreams.* I heard it first from my high-school guidance counselor as I sat on her couch gazing down at a glossy admissions pamphlet from UCLA. *Follow Your Dreams.* It's scrawled on every celebrity-signed eight-by-ten, regurgitated by every Oprah success story, flop-sweating valedictorian,

and for-a-fee guru. *Follow Your Dreams.* And I did, all the way across the country, a carpet cleaner's kid, trading one puzzling culture for another, rocky shorelines for smooth ones, buttoned-up Brahmin lockjaw for surfer drawl, ski sweaters for jog bras.

Like every other wannabe, I started typing a screenplay within the first week of my move, hammering away on a Mac Classic before I bothered to unpack into my dorm room. As much as I loved it at UCLA, I was an outsider from the start, nose up against the glass, a window-shopper. It took years for me to realize that in LA *everybody* is an outsider. Some are just better at nodding along to the music we're supposed to be hearing. *Follow Your Dreams. Never Give Up.*

My first stroke of luck came early, but like most priceless things it was entirely unexpected and not at all what I was looking for. A freshman-orientation party, lots of too-loud laughter and teenage posturing, and there she was, slumped against the wall by the exit, her disaffected posture betrayed by lively, clever eyes. She was, impossibly, alone. Steeled with a cup of warm keg beer, I approached. 'You look bored.'

Those dark eyes ticked over to me, took my measure. 'Is that a proposition?'

'Proposition?' I repeated lamely, stalling.

'An offer to unbore me?'

She was worth getting nervous over, but still, I hoped it didn't show. I said, 'Seems like that could be the challenge of a lifetime.'

'Are you up to it?' she asked.

Ariana and I got married right out of college. There was never really any question that we wouldn't. We were the first to get hitched. Rented tuxes, three-tiered frilly cake, everyone dewy-eyed and attentive, as if it were the first time in history a bride had step-pause-stepped down the aisle to Handel's *Water Music.*

Ari was stunning. At the reception I looked over at her and got too choked up to finish my toast.

For ten years I taught high-school English, writing screenplays on the side. My schedule gave me ample time to indulge myself – out at 3:00 P.M., long holidays, summers – and every now and then I'd mail a script out to friends of friends in the industry and hear nothing back. Ariana not only never complained about my time at the keyboard but was happy for the satisfaction I generally got out of it, just as I loved her devotion to her plants and design sketches. Ever since we'd fled that orientation party together, we'd always kept a balance – not too clingy, not too aloof. Neither of us had an interest in being famous, or all that rich. Mundane as it sounds, we wanted to do things we cared about, things that made us happy.

But I kept hearing that nagging voice. I couldn't stop California dreaming. Less often about red carpets and Cannes than about being on a set watching a couple of actors mouthing stuff I devised for better actors to say. Just a low-budget flick to limp onto the sixteenth screen at the multiplex. It wasn't that much to ask.

A little more than a year ago, I met an agent at a picnic, and she enthused about my script for a conspiracy thing called *They're Watching*, about an investment banker whose life comes apart after he improbably switches laptops on the subway during a blackout. Mob heavies and CIA agents start dismantling his life like a NASCAR pit crew. He loses his perspective and then his wife but of course wins her back in the end. He returns to his life battered, wiser, and more appreciative. Not the most original plot, certainly, but the right people found it convincing. I wound up getting a good chunk of change for the script, and a decent rewrite fee on top of that. I even got a nice write-up in the trades – my picture beneath the fold in *Variety* and two column inches about a high-school

teacher making good. I was thirty-three, and I had finally arrived.

*Never Give Up,* they say.

*Follow Your Dreams.*

Another adage, perhaps, would have been more apt.

*Careful What You Wish For.*

# Chapter 3

Even before the footage of me showed up in my morning newspaper, privacy had been hard to come by. My one haven – an upholstered interior, six feet by four-and-change – still required six windows. A mobile aquarium. A floating jail cell. The only space left in my life where someone couldn't walk in and catch me covering the tail end of a crying jag or convincing myself I'd make it through another workday. The car was pretty banged up, the dashboard in particular. Dented plastic, cracked faceplate over the odometer, air-conditioner dial barely holding on.

I slotted the Camry into a space in front of Bel Air Foods. Walking the aisles, I gathered up a banana, a bag of trail mix, and a SoBe black iced tea, which came loaded with ginkgo, ginseng, and a handful of other supplements designed to kick-start the bleary-eyed. As I neared the checkout lane, my eye caught on Keith Conner, gazing from a *Vanity Fair* cover. He reclined in a bathtub filled not with water but with leaves, and the headline read, CONNER TRADES GREEN FOR GREEN.

'How's Ariana?' Bill asked, cuing me to move along. A flustered mother with her kid was waiting behind me, grinning impatiently.

A plastic smile flashed onto my face, instinctive as a nervous laugh. 'Okay, thanks.'

I set my items down, the belt whirred, and Bill rang me up, saying, 'You got one of the last good ones, that's for sure.'

I smiled; Flustered Mom smiled; Bill smiled. We were all so happy.

In the car I pinched the metal post where the button used to be and twisted on the radio: distract me, please. Down the hill I veered around the turn onto lurch-and-go Sunset Boulevard, and the sun came on bright and angry. Lowering the visor, I confronted the photo rubber-banded into place. About six months ago, Ariana had discovered an online photo site and had tortured me for a few weeks by reprinting flashes-from-the-past and hiding them in various places. I still found new pictures now and then, vestiges of playfulness. Of course, this one I'd discovered immediately. Me and Ariana at some intolerable college formal, me wearing a shoulder-padded blazer with, alas, cuffed sleeves, her in a puffy taffeta contraption that resembled a life-saving device. We looked uncomfortable and amused, painfully aware that we were playacting, that we didn't belong, that we didn't really fit in like everyone else. But we loved that. That's how we were best.

*You got one of the last good ones, that's for sure.*

I hit the dashboard to feel the sting in my knuckles. And kept hitting. The scab cracked; my wrist stung; the air-conditioner dial split. With smarting eyes, my chest heaving, I looked out one of my six windows. An older blonde in a red Mustang studied me from one lane over.

I cranked that plastic smile onto my face. She looked away. The light changed, and we drifted back off into our private lives.