

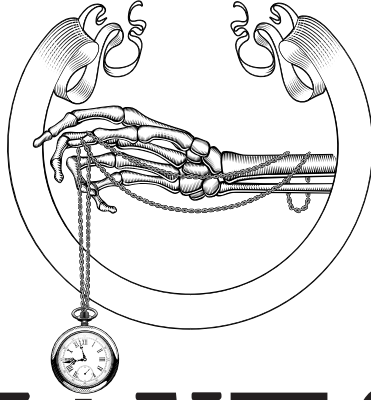
SOMETIMES EVEN SERIAL KILLERS NEED A HAND



PHANTOM

HELEN POWER

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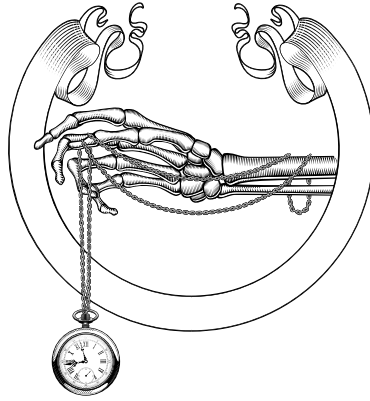
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IT WON'T BE LONG NOW.

I float amid the crowd, riding the wave of the shallow and elite that swim around me like a school of fish in an aquarium. They have no idea there is a shark in their midst. Enthralled by my wit and beauty, partygoers converge upon me, eager to meet me, to be close to me, to know me. I feel like I am the honorary guest, despite the lack of invitation. Despite no one knowing who I am or why I'm really here.

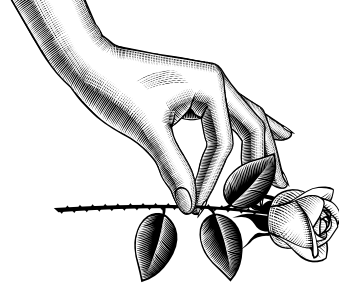
I nurse my martini as I flit from conversation to conversation. They are all fools. Dullards chattering about the exhibit as if they know anything about true art. True art takes risks; it deviates from the norm, it makes people feel uncomfortable, aroused, afraid. I am a true artist, though my work will never be on display like this, at an event so pretentious and asinine. My work isn't of traditional mediums. My expertise isn't as derivative as paint on canvas or molded blocks of clay.

True creation comes from destruction.

I know that I shouldn't have come. But I couldn't resist. My gaze roams the room. I'm a predator stalking my prey. I spot her immediately. Sticking out like a sore thumb in this crowd of the sophisticated and affluent. The girl has no idea what is about to happen to her. That she has been chosen. That she is about to make the ultimate sacrifice, for art.

Envy and anticipation course through me as I watch her clutch a glass in her flawless left hand. I've been broken for too long. It's kept me from my life's purpose, from sharing my vision with the world. But soon I'll be whole again. Soon my name will return to the lips of everyone in this city, whether they're admiring my craft or simply don't understand it. Soon I can get back to my art.

It won't be much longer.



1



The event was disgustingly extravagant. Moonlight cascaded through the towering stained-glass windows and pooled on the marble floor, which gleamed a garish silver and gold. Massive crystal chandeliers strained against the chains suspending them from the vaulted ceiling. The gentle strains of a violin drifted through the hall, only to drown in the loud hum of the guests' mindless prattling. The scent of floor polish cut through the overpowering mix of expensive perfume and cologne, mingling with the unmistakable stench of narcissism and pretention. All around me, people strutted about in their decadent outfits. Draping ball gowns, blinding diamonds, and expressions laced with condescension seemed to be the required uniform of the evening.

I didn't belong here.

I shifted uncomfortably in my dress, which I'd "borrowed" from my roommate, Hanna. The Danish goddess was at least one size smaller than me, and I was starting to feel it in the bust and hip areas of the slinky red number I'd found in her closet. I placed my empty martini glass—only my third drink of the evening—on the platter of a waiter who brushed past me. I barely had the chance to grab a glass of red wine before he was gone. A splash of the liquid sloshed over the glass rim, spraying my wrist. I tensed, my eyes roving over my dress, but I hadn't spilled any on it. Hanna was quiet

and I didn't know her very well, but I was pretty sure that if I borrowed her dress without permission and returned it damaged, she would kick me out of our loft apartment. She was the perfect roommate. She was hardly ever around, she let me use the main living area as my creative workspace, and she sometimes covered my part of the rent. She kept to herself and never asked prying questions—like when was I going to sell something, and why wasn't I part of any art shows, even the lousy ones like this one that featured no talent whatsoever. It was the ideal living situation, and I didn't want to screw it up.

I glanced around the hall. Satisfied that no one was looking my way, I surreptitiously bent my head and sucked the red wine off my wrist. Just at that moment, my eyes landed on a woman staring at me from over forty feet away. She looked just like everyone else here, but her arm was swathed in a sleek black sling. Flushing, I spun around and hurried in the opposite direction, humiliation hot on my heels. I had no idea who that woman was—she was too far away for me to get a good look—but it would be just my luck that someone with influence in the art world would be the one to catch me casually licking myself at a black-tie event. I pushed the embarrassment from my mind and didn't think of it again.

Another half hour and several failed attempts at networking crawled by. I glanced around the hall, but of course there were no clocks mounted on the cold stone walls. I hadn't worn a watch, because my cheap-ass timepiece would have been a dead giveaway that I didn't belong, and pulling out my phone would have had the same effect. Despite having no idea what time it was, I knew it was getting late. This reception would be winding down within an hour or two.

I shouldn't have come. I hadn't planned to. I'd gotten the invitation in the mail two weeks ago, and I'd thought about declining, despite the open bar. Amrita Tejal, one of my former classmates from college, was putting on an art exhibit. I hadn't heard from her since graduation, and part of me had assumed that she'd moved on, married, and given up the dream of being an Artist with a capital A. But no, she'd persevered and now she was displaying her work at the Grant Park Fine Art Gallery. The masochist in me decided to

show up at the last minute. I needed to know what she did. I needed to see it for myself. I also couldn't pass up the free alcohol, even though it turned out to be watered down.

I'd made the rash decision to show up, and despite the appetizers and endless supply of alcohol, I was regretting it. I'd already gone through the main exhibit. I'd expected to see something intriguing, inspiring, intimidating, but instead Amrita's art was simply . . . imitative. It had consisted of three narrow halls, the dull, off-white walls mounted with television screens. On them, there was a woman, the same woman on each screen, but in a different stage of undress. She was taking off her public persona—her business attire, her makeup, her facade—before retiring for the evening. The final panel, which took up an entire wall at the far end, depicted her standing by a window, stark naked. Not even a robe or a strategically placed shadow to hide her nakedness. I'd suddenly felt exposed in that moment. I was that woman, naked, mounted high for all to see, in my too-tight dress and fake Jimmy Choos.

Unable to spot another waiter, I dropped my wineglass in a potted fern. I casually approached the buffet table and selected a shrimp cocktail. I tried not to be obvious as I wolfed it down. Since Hanna was hardly ever around, she didn't keep our fridge fully stocked. I barely had enough money to cover rent from my part-time job as a dealer at the Horseshoe Hammond. I wasn't exactly pitching in for fresh produce.

My phone chirped and I glanced at the screen. It was my ex, Ben. I deleted the message without bothering to read it. He was awfully needy for a drug dealer. I'd told him I wouldn't give him the time of day after we broke up, and even though it was nighttime, I still wasn't going to respond to his texts.

“Roz! Ohmygoodness, you made it!”

I froze, jumbo shrimp half lodged in my throat. My cheeks heated up as I forced myself to swallow. I turned around.

“Amrita! It's been *so* long! How have you *been*?” My words oozed insincerity.

Amrita looked the same as I remembered. Tall and elegant, with smooth, brown skin and her hair pulled back into an elaborate twist. But her outfit was different. This one screamed wealth and success, despite this being, as far as I knew, her first art show. My attention was caught by the strange tone of one of her irises. Had she always had different-colored eyes?

“I’m doing really great. Clearly,” Amrita said, gesturing around the crowded hall. She was doing better than “great.” Everyone here had come to see her art. I couldn’t even get so much as a form rejection letter back from the shitty little galleries around town, and she was having a show at Grant Fucking Park.

“I loved your exhibit. Very, uh, unique,” I choked out the words.

Amrita smiled slightly. “Yes, the idea came to me in a dream.”

Well, her dreams were more unoriginal than those of a teenage high schooler. If I’d been paid a nickel for every time I’d dreamed I was naked and on display, I’d be a millionaire. I twisted my lips into a pleasant smile. “I’m surprised you invited me.”

Amrita was watching me, intently, wordlessly. She looked me up and down with her unnerving eyes. “I love the dress. It’s very risqué. Who are you wearing? Abbiati?”

I smiled, though it felt more like baring my teeth. I hoped there wasn’t shrimp caught in between them. “I’m not really sure. Someone else picked out the dress.” That much was true. Who knew where Hanna had gotten it? Maybe it really was designer. More likely, it was Target.

I couldn’t tell if she was buying what I was selling. She gave me a little smile. Aside from her initial enthusiasm at seeing me, she was very cool, calm, and collected. Nothing like the frenetic, energetic girl I knew in college. Back then, I would be tempted to douse her with a bucket of cold water just to get her to shut up. Now I was begging for her to say something, anything to end this silence and quiet the storm inside my head.

“So, is this your first art show?” I asked. I should have excused myself. What was I thinking, prolonging this torture? Jealousy reared its ugly head, and it took all my self-control not to gouge her perfect, hypnotic little eyes out.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Amrita said with a mysterious smile. “I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening. If you’ll excuse me, I should be mingling. There are some important people here tonight.”

Even though I’d wanted the conversation to end, her words still felt like a slap to the face. I wish I’d thought of telling her I had places to be. “As should I,” I replied. I awkwardly spun around, swayed around another waiter carrying a tray, and swooped in, snatching up yet another martini.

I took a deep sip as I surreptitiously glanced back to watch Amrita dissolve into the crowd. I supposed that could have gone worse. She could have asked me about my own art.

“Are you a friend of Ms. Tejal’s?” A vaguely British voice came from just behind my ear.

I tried not to flinch as hot breath tickled my neck. I turned around slowly and gave the speaker the once-over. A lazy smile clung to a remarkably unremarkable face. He wasn’t tall; he only had a few inches on me. He had a receding hairline and premature wrinkles lined his forehead, but the suit he wore clung nicely to his abdominal muscles. And it was a decidedly *expensive* suit.

“We aren’t friends. We went to college together,” I said with a wave of my hand.

“I didn’t think you looked like you’d be friends with her,” he replied.

I narrowed my eyes. What did he mean by that? Could he tell that I didn’t belong here? I bit back my retort when I caught sight of the Rolex on his wrist. Maybe I could get a free dinner out of him. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said instead.

He tossed me a knowing smile that was surprisingly attractive. I was suddenly glad I hadn’t been rude. I was interested in getting to know him a little better.

I took a slow sip of another martini that had suddenly appeared in my hand. I casually looked away from this man, my eyes scanning the crowd, acting as if I wasn’t interested in anything he had to offer.

“Are you an artist?”

“Yes,” I replied. I didn’t elaborate. He didn’t have to know that I worked part-time and that I poured every free moment into working on my sculptures, half of which I’d burned or thrown out the window in fits of rage when they were rejected or critiqued unfairly.

“My name’s Sylvain Dufour,” he said primly in his British accent.

I didn’t bother to respond or even glance in his direction.

He shifted slightly, as if trying to draw my attention. I finally deigned to give him a demure look. His eyes locked on mine. He was already smitten. I pushed aside any guilt I might feel at the fact that I was planning to use him. All I could afford to see were dollar signs in the form of his sparkling cufflinks and fine-tailored suit.

I gave him another once-over, my eyes lingering on his hair. At least he didn’t have plugs. I much preferred a balding man over someone who was feebly battling his genetics.

“I’m Regan Osbourne,” I said, keeping my tone casual as I returned my attention to the crowd.

“I haven’t heard of you.”

Ouch. “Well, I haven’t heard of you either,” I snapped without thinking. I pressed my lips together, holding my breath.

My fear that I’d turned him off was unfounded. Instead of recoiling, he sidled in a little closer. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Men—especially the rich and self-entitled ones—never seemed to like nice girls.

“Why haven’t I heard of you?” He didn’t make it sound like an insult. He seemed genuinely curious.

Well, he hadn’t seen my art. I swallowed, pushing aside that invasive thought. “I’m between projects. My work is more . . . private.”

He nodded, and I had the dreadful feeling that he was reading between the lines. He knew I was a fraud. Untalented. Delusional.

“Ms. Tejal almost didn’t have her work displayed here tonight,” he said. “Sometimes you just need to know the right people.”

At that, I perked up. I tried to hide my interest. “Do *you* know the right people?”

He didn't reply. Instead he gestured for a waiter to bring him another drink. I needed to learn how to do that.

"The right people?" I repeated impatiently, once he had another drink in hand.

Sylvain's cocky smirk was back. "Ms. Tejal had a benefactor. A man sponsoring her dreams. Otherwise, she wouldn't be where she is here today."

I stifled a snicker. "So, she has a sugar daddy?"

Sylvain's cerulean-blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "I'm not privy to the details of their arrangement." His eyes dropped from my face, and I waited patiently, trying not to laugh. Was he implying that he was interested in being my "benefactor?"

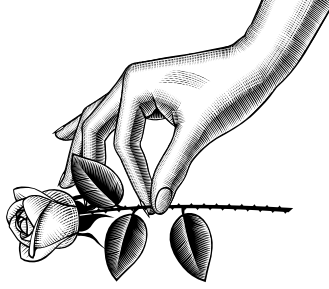
I finished yet another martini—my fourth? Fifth?—and Sylvain beckoned the waiter to bring me another. I giggled, then clamped my mouth shut, embarrassment flooding through me and heating my cheeks. I might not have been drunk, but I was well on my way there. "Are you trying to get me plastered or something?"

Sylvain smirked, then took a sip from his glass. I thought I heard him say, "Or something."

I blinked. "What was that?"

His lips curled into that same arrogant smile, but the alcohol infusing the blood in my veins made it seem less annoying, more beguiling. He didn't answer my question.

The rest of the night was a blur. I remembered laughing at a lot of things that seemed funny at the time. I remembered telling him he reminded me of James Bond, because of the suit and accent, but informing him that the beloved MI6 agent had a full head of thick hair. I remembered leaning heavily against him and whispering seductively in his ear. I remembered waving good-bye to a stoic-looking Amrita as I left with Sylvain, my arm linked around his waist. I remembered entering the cab, but not leaving it.



2



Sunlight streamed through the window, its white-hot rays burning my retinas. I squeezed my eyelids shut as I swore under my breath. I felt as if I'd been hit by a bulldozer, and the pounding in my head rivaled the soundtrack of a construction site. I rolled over, groaning, pulling the satin duvet over my head.

Duvet? I cracked one eye open.

"Where the hell am I?" I rubbed my temples as I sat up, taking in my surroundings. I was in a hotel room; that much was obvious. It was a lavish one at that, with its sturdy, cherrywood furniture and ornate crown moldings. I was in a bed that was bigger than my childhood bedroom, and I didn't think I'd ever felt anything as soft as the mattress I lay on. My—I mean, Hanna's—red dress lay crumpled in a heap on the floor. A quick glance under the duvet revealed that I was naked.

Visions of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer danced across my vision, courtesy of my mother. She'd had an inflated paranoia about serial killers and getting murdered, which made growing up in Chicago extra hard for the daughter of a single mother. If I was feeling introspective, I'd admit that that was one of the reasons why I ended up this way. Reckless and impulsive, in an effort to prove that I was nothing like my mother. But the city's most recent serial killer, the Phantom Strangler, was now inactive. For almost

two years, he'd haunted the streets of Chicago, targeting young women in high-risk areas. He was known for striking at night, leaving no witnesses, no evidence, no trace. Like a ghost. No new victims had been found in the last year, so it was presumed he'd either found another hunting ground or died. Either way, he was no longer stalking the women of Chicago. Besides, if I'd been kidnapped by a serial killer, I doubted that I'd be waking up enveloped by luxury sheets in a five-star hotel.

Memories from last night trickled in along with the sound of running water from the room's adjoining bathroom. Last night's dance partner was in the shower, and I was relieved that I had some time to pull myself together before having to face him.

My phone chimed. I sighed, rolling out of bed to excavate it from where it was buried under Hanna's dress. The screen sported a brand-new zig zag crack all the way across its smudged face.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," I muttered.

The text was from Hanna. WHERE ARE YOU? RENT WAS DUE YESTERDAY. I'M NOT COVERING YOUR HALF AGAIN.

Another text chimed. AND WHERE THE HELL IS MY RED DRESS?

My blood ran cold. How had she noticed it was missing so fast? I picked up the dress, groaning as my eyes snagged on the torn fabric. My new friend must have gotten a little carried away last night. Or I had. Either way, Hanna wasn't going to be happy when she discovered that not only had I ruined her good dress, but I didn't have enough money to cover even a third of my portion of the rent.

I swore, threw on the dress, and sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. This would be the third month in a row that she'd have to cover the rent—if I could manage to convince her to do it again. She wasn't going to be so forgiving this time, especially since I'd destroyed her property.

My eyes landed on a thick black wallet resting on the nightstand. Without giving myself the chance to think through what I was about to do, I grabbed it and flipped it open. The pockets were empty—no IDs, no credit cards—but that barely registered once I spotted the crisp hundred-dollar

bills lining the inner fold. My agile fingers trailed over the bills as I counted. Twelve hundred dollars. I licked my lips as I stared at the money. I could do a lot with that much money.

The running water stopped.

“Regan? You awake?” A voice called from the bathroom.

I was gone before he could return for a second round.



I nearly got run over by a white sedan as I jogged in my stilettos across the street, but I was in too much of a hurry to stop to give the driver a piece of my mind. I needed to put as much distance between myself and the Ritz-Carlton as humanly possible before the man I picked up last night realized I'd stolen from him.

I was so unbelievably stupid. I shouldn't have acted so impulsively. I should have waited. I should have talked to him. I might have been able to get him to lend—or even give—me money. So much for having a sugar daddy. I was pretty sure that they frowned upon theft. And it was a theft of over five hundred dollars, which was bigger than a mere misdemeanor, if he chose to press charges. The only reason I knew this was because I'd gone to a few law classes in my sophomore year of college when I'd had the hots for the TA. After four dates, he'd professed his undying love for me. Two days later, I caught him in his office with his head between some chick's legs. A chick who was also taking that class. I'd been made to look like a fool, and after I wiped away my tears, I planned the perfect revenge. I set it up so that the prof would catch him with his pants down—quite literally—and he lost his job and his funding for grad school. I ended up dropping out of the class less than a week later.

I may have enjoyed doling out justice, but I wasn't particularly interested in the law.

I hopped on the L, ignoring the revulsion radiating from my fellow passengers. My dress was ripped along the outer side of my breast, and I

distinctly remembered not having bothered with waterproof mascara last night. I smiled at an elderly woman who was wearing a pink floral jacket and Mary Jane shoes. She looked away quickly.

Once I got home, I was greeted by a royally pissed-off roommate at the door to our loft apartment. Her wild, icy blue eyes took in my appearance with unrestrained fury. She was petite, but she could be fiery, and it took a lot for her to get this worked up. I took a giant step backward.

“*Milde Moses!*” she snapped.

I didn’t know what that meant, so I wordlessly handed her my share of the rent. And the previous month’s rent.

Her mouth fell open as she flipped through the bills. She eyed her torn dress and my hooker heels. “How did you get the money?” Her voice was clouded with suspicious disbelief.

What she was likely thinking wasn’t too far from the truth. I sighed. My head was pounding, and I couldn’t conjure up enough energy to be disgusted with myself. “How do you think?”

I started to walk away, but she grabbed my arm. “My dress,” she said through clenched teeth.

Blood boiling, I tore my arm away. I pulled the dress over my head and threw it at her feet. I strode past her and went to the “kitchen,” which was a corner of the loft that was basically just a stove, a fridge, and a foot and a half of cracked countertop that engulfed the sink. The landlord had slapped a layer of cheap linoleum onto the cement floor before calling it a day. We had a lopsided bookcase that was our “pantry,” which currently consisted of a half-empty box of cereal and a sleeve of crackers that had expired in 2021. I poured the dregs of the coffeepot into a chipped “I ♥ Chicago” mug and took a deep swallow. It was cold. It was chunky. It was bitter as hell. But it was *coffee*.

Already, my head had started to clear. I glared down at the scuffed linoleum. I sighed and turned toward Hanna, who still lingered by the front door. My best approach was diplomacy. “I’m sorry,” I coughed out. “I’m a really shitty roommate.”

Hanna's eyes went so large that I thought they might pop out of her head. That would have been an interesting sight. "You're not . . . shitty." Her delicate accent made the curse word sound ever so quaint.

"You don't have to be nice to me," I said. I suddenly felt so tired. Exhausted beyond my twenty-nine years. I hated thinking about how old I was. I was twenty-nine, and what did I have to show for it? I had a lousy part-time job, a dream I was no closer to attaining than I was ten years ago, and one friend—a roommate I never saw and who probably secretly hated my guts.

Hanna sighed. "Put on some clothes," she said, taking off in the direction of her "bedroom," which was actually just a corner of the loft apartment that was cordoned off with an old velvet curtain that she'd picked up at a flea market. It looked like it belonged in a fake psychic's reading room, adorning a table underneath a murky crystal ball. She hesitated. "Your *own* clothes," she added, before disappearing behind the curtain.

I went to the bathroom and took a long, hot shower, or while the hot water lasted, which wasn't very long these days. We lived in an old turn-of-the-century warehouse that had been renovated into an apartment complex. The pipes—like everything else in this place—were run down and on the brink of total collapse. Of course, our slumlord couldn't be bothered with fixing something as trivial as plumbing. Though at least today the water was relatively clear and not the rusty hue of spewed-up blood.

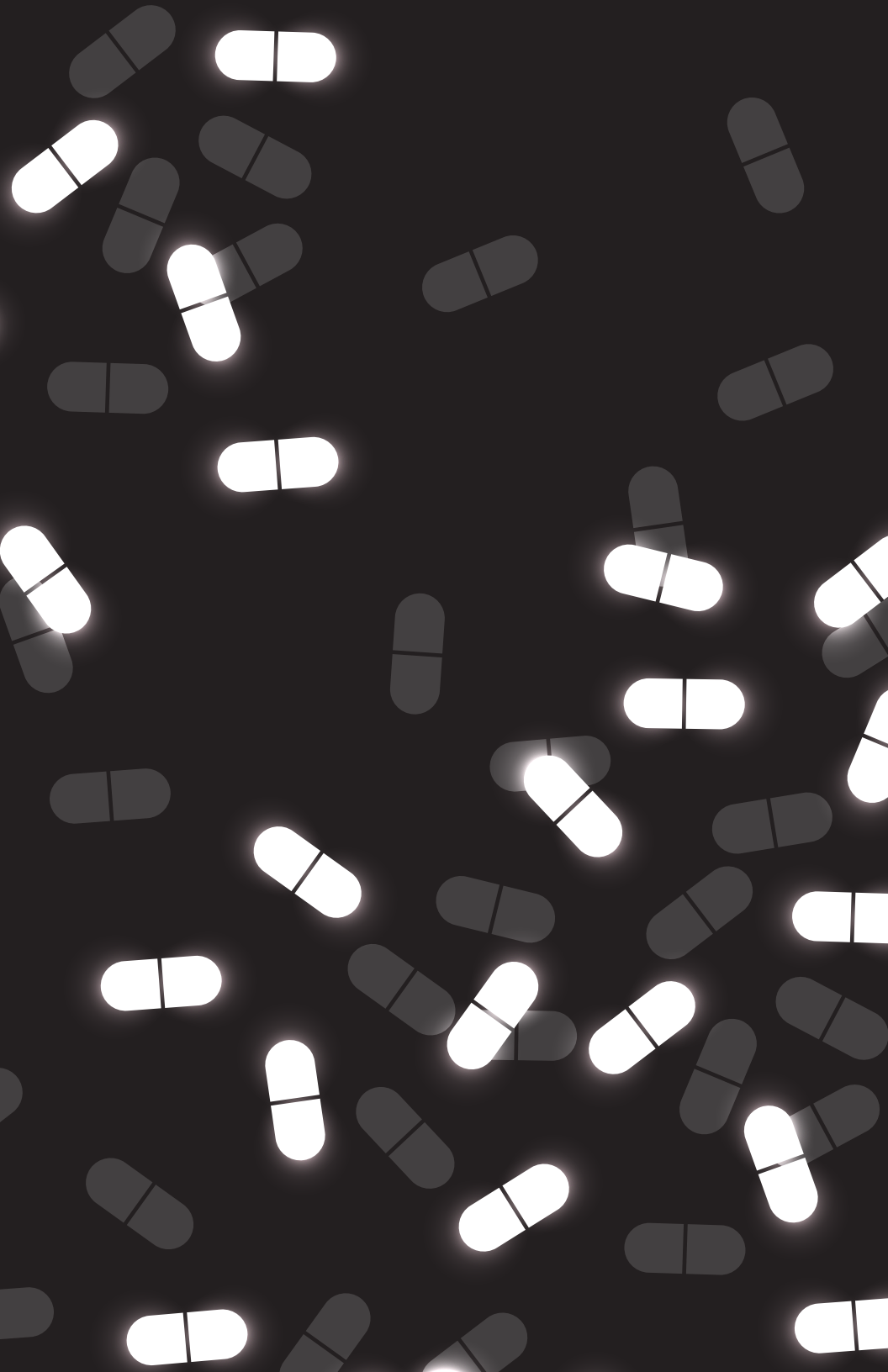
Afterward I slipped into my pink silk bathrobe, grabbed a bowl from the kitchen, and poured some dry cat food into it. I opened the loft door and set it on the floor.

"Hey, Little Guy, it's breakfast time!" I called out.

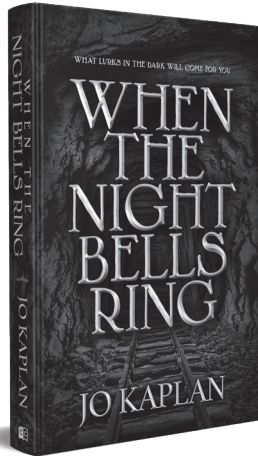
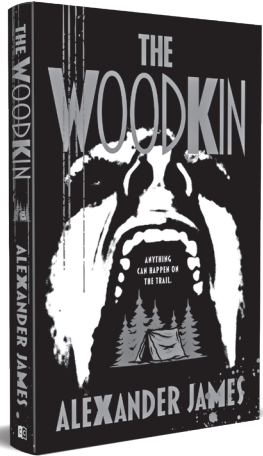
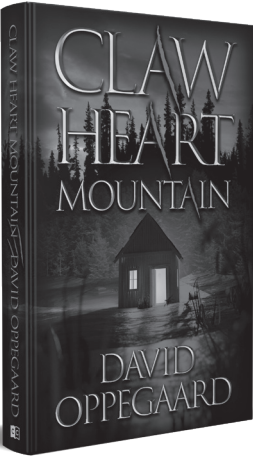
There was a mangy gray stray cat that spent time in and around our apartment building. I didn't know how it got into the building, let alone onto our floor, but it was in the corridor more often than not. Hanna said it only kept showing up because I fed it. But how could I resist those emerald-green eyes that looked up at me like I hung the moon? I wasn't a *total* monster. I might not have had enough money to keep myself fed, but I'd be damned if I didn't make sure I had enough kitty kibble to keep Little Guy coming

back. I went back into the apartment and stood by the window, nursing another mug of coffee. A white sedan sat at the curb, and I could make out the faint outline of a man sitting behind the steering wheel. That looked like the car that nearly hit me on my way out of Sylvester—Simon?—whatever his name was's hotel.

I tried to read the license plate, but I wasn't at the right angle. Not that it mattered, since I hadn't caught the license plate of the previous car. Could it be the same one? I shook my head, turning away. I was always paranoid when I was hungover.



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Regan “Roz” Osbourne is broke. Her ex-boyfriend won’t take no for an answer, and no one is taking her art work seriously. So when a mysterious stranger offers her a million dollars and safety from her unstable ex in exchange for her left hand, she can’t afford to refuse.

Immediately following the amputation, she’s racked with insufferable phantom limb pain. Desperate for relief, she enrolls in an experimental drug trial. But this drug has a peculiar side effect—she develops a psychic connection to her missing limb. She soon discovers that Chicago’s long-dormant Phantom Strangler is now wearing her hand and is using it . . . to kill.


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