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# Smooth as Raven's Claws

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*Smooth as Raven's Claws*

Kyle Farnworth

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Lee Torda, Thesis Director  
Dr. James Crowley, Committee Member  
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This Creative Honors Thesis titled *Smooth as Raven's Claws* is a novel that focuses on a young mixed martial arts fighter named Dennis Lopes after his release from prison and his struggle to find a place in the corrupt world he is entering. The piece is populated with many characters whose lives intersect as they form a radical group of young outcasts and misfits that try to create positive change in the fictional Chatgrove City, though not by positive means. Dennis becomes a masked vigilante known only as “The Raven”, and he uses his newfound persona and followers to try and overthrow a corrupt mayor named Benjamin McGivens. This novel explores themes such as corruption in the state and the individual, sources of power, and the effects of keeping secrets from those we love. In line with contemporary reboots of superhero films and graphic novels, this story pursues darker and more complex themes where good and evil coincide in both heroes and villains.

Unlike traditional novels that influence other forms of media, this thesis works the other way around. Television, film, and graphic novels provide the greatest influence on this text. This thesis includes the entire novel, though only roughly 35 pages of text are included here. In the writing and revision of this novel, several books were used as source material, including the graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, Stephen King’s memoir *On Writing*, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*.

Though this project should be seen as a novel in the traditional sense, it is greatly inspired by visual media. This thesis blends the superhero fiction of graphic novels, with hard-hitting drama and grit from television shows such as *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy*. Other major influences include contemporary super hero movies like Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight trilogy. But the project is also informed by a long-standing tradition of cultural commentary in literature that uses the fantastic to explore society such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Going

back further still, this story is also influenced by Shakespeare's histories, such as *Richard II* and *Henry IV I*, in which titles and power change hands quickly due to war and corruption. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (Game of Thrones) features much of the same, war, terror, and death. Lastly, Mark Rudd, former member of the radical anti-war group, The Weather Underground, wrote a memoir titled *Underground*, in which he talks about his time forming the group and protesting the Vietnam War, which was also a heavily influence to this work.

Ultimately this piece is influenced by many genres and many sources of media.

The first chapter presented here for the readers is Chapter Two entitled “The Goddess of Wisdom.” This chapter introduces one of the main characters of the work, Athena Justice, and her partner, Lily. They attend a high-end gala as the dates of lawyer Benjamin McGivens, who will eventually become to novel’s main antagonist. Since this chapter is so early in the text, there isn’t much background information needed in order to understand what is taking place. Athena’s next assignment, as she calls them, will be Dennis Lopes. Her loyalty to the Raven in the early parts of the novel is grounded in duty as opposed to love and admiration.

In this chapter, I attempted to unveil Athena as a character by deliberately lingering on key moments both in the present and past, such as her time with her father and interactions with Mrs. Wilkes across the street. I tried to slowly reveal what Athena actually does for a living in an attempt to force the reader to assume whether she is inherently good or bad and her assignments are people she is protecting or assassinating. Lastly, I used this early chapter as a moment to incorporate some symbolism that points at early themes, characterization, and events that will take place later in the novel. Some of these moments include the description of Athena’s tattoo, her favorite movie being *Sin City*, and the use of multiple identities to gain an advantage over suspecting individuals.

The next selection provided skip to Chapter Fourteen: “Penetrating Boundaries.” Every year, before the election, the people of Chatgrove City hold a parade in which the mayoral candidates assemble floats and march down the biggest street in the city to make one last impression on the people before Election Day. The Raven and his men (and woman) decide that this is the opportunity to make a first public appearance in order to get the current mayor, David Audycki, re-elected. The challenger is Ben McGivens, who has come a long way since Chapter Two.

At the heart of this chapter is Packer Jacobs, the youngest member of the Raven’s organization at just 17 years old. He is desperate to prove himself and volunteers to be the one to go down to the parade and hack into McGivens’ float. At the conclusion of this chapter things have gotten real for the organization, as they’ve reached the point of criminal activity and are no longer just “playing games”. Other characters making appearances include Mayor Audycki’s son, David (aka “Dycki”), Packer’s two older brothers, Colt and Jet, and Dennis’s cellmate from prison, Jimmy. Along with Athena, these characters make up the Raven’s organization.

I chose to include this chapter in the selection due to the importance of the chapter in the overall story arch and the relatable character of Packer Jacobs. In this chapter, I attempted to slowly build tension in Packer’s key moments to make the reader fear his ultimate fate. I wanted to use this slow tension build to highlight Packer’s increased courage as the chapter unfolded. In a novel that contains so many major characters, it becomes a bit of a challenge to give them all their time in the spotlight and this chapter contains a scene in which all the major characters give their opinion. Lastly, this chapter also shows a distinct difference in tone from “The Goddess of Wisdom.” Athena is an older, more mature, calculated character than young Packer, and the difference style of writing in these two chapters reflect that.

As the story progresses, Mayor Audycki wins re-election, but he is kidnapped and murdered by Ben McGivens and his men. In a desperate attempt to save the Mayor that night, the Raven and his organization foolishly rushed into McGivens' territory where they were outsmarted and outnumbered. They not only failed to save Mayor Audycki, but one of their own, Colt, gets left behind as they made their escape. They find him dead a few days later, hanging from a fire escape with the words "Who is the Raven?" carved into his chest. Benjamin McGivens is named Mayor of Chatgrove City to take Audycki's place and frames the Raven for the murder.

The final selection included here is Chapter Twenty: "The College Graduate". The College Graduate referred to here is Franklin Mitchell, who works for the newly appointed Mayor Ben McGivens as his personal assistant. Franklin was there the night that Mayor Audycki was killed but is left in the dark as to what type of corruption is really going on at city hall. In an attempt to figure out what happened to Colt and what kind of information he gave to McGivens about the Raven's identity, the organization decides to kidnap Franklin and force him into talking. What happens next shows just how far they have come from the beginning of the novel.

In typical superhero story tradition, death is shown as the norm and the first nineteen chapter of *Smooth as Raven's Claws* follows that tradition. In this chapter, however, I wanted to combat this tradition by showing the normalcy of Franklin's life and making his eventual death feel heavy, for lack of a better term. Dennis has been shooting people with a bow and arrow consistently over the course of the novel, which the reader would view as not a big deal because that is what superheroes do. In this chapter, however, I use Franklin's family life, potential, and normality to show the gravity of the decisions that Dennis and the organization have been

making over the course of the novel. The progression of violence escalates from “The Goddess of Wisdom,” to “Penetrating Boundaries,” and to “The College Graduate.”

I just want to take one last opportunity to thank you for taking the time to read these selections from my Honors Thesis. If you have any desire to read more, that can be arranged without issue. I look forward to hearing any comments and feedback you may have.

## Chapter Two: The Goddess of Wisdom

Athena's wavy, red hair blew in the wind behind her head like a fire that wouldn't go out. Her drop-top Camaro roared down the streets of the Southside on a beautiful Sunday morning. She was wearing the same tank-top from the night before, which revealed her full-sleeve tattoo, a blend of color and intricate design that ran from her right shoulder all the way down to her wrist. It was a depiction of the War in Heaven. Her elbow was the threshold between Heaven and Hell. Her upper arm's primary color was blue, and warring angels did battle on her biceps and her triceps. Lucifer was in free-fall down the sleeve and into the red and yellow fires of Hell that engulfed her forearm. She still wasn't sure if the story was a triumph or a tragedy; it all depended on whose side you were on.

The looks from nearby drivers had become an everyday thing, wondering how a girl like her could afford a car like that. When she was a young girl, her father used to sit her on his lap and flip through pages of Hot Rod magazine while his daughter looked on in awe. He'd point out the Camaro and say, "This, honey, is a sports car," and that one day he would have one of his own. Unfortunately, he met his maker before he could save enough to buy the car, but Athena made sure she kept his dream alive. She had saved her paychecks through years of walking and hitching rides until she finally had enough to make the purchase. She took one last great drag from her cigarette and flicked it down into the street, blowing a trail of smoke that dissipated into the morning air.

She pulled into her driveway and waved to Mrs. Wilkes across the street. Mrs. Wilkes was up with the sunrise as usual, and was taking care of the flowers that lined her white picket fence. Mrs. Wilkes was used to seeing Athena come home fairly early in the morning in the same

clothes from the night before.

“Good morning, Mrs. Wilkes,” she said.

“Good morning, dear. You’re looking lovely as always.”

“Aw, thank you ma’am.” She pulled her Nike duffel bag out from the trunk. “Do you mind giving me directions to that Fountain of Youth you’re bathing in?”

“Oh, not me sweetheart,” Mrs. Wilkes said, “But don’t let me keep you. Head inside. Get some sleep, and make sure you stay safe at that job of yours.”

“Always do,” Athena said with a smile and headed through her front door.

The truth was Mrs. Wilkes had no idea what Athena did for a job. She would wake up at 7AM and spend a few hours in her garden, and the pretty girl across the street would pull into her driveway in that expensive car after leaving at some point the night before. Mrs. Wilkes probably assumed she was stripping. But Athena’s warmth toward the old woman put a smile on Mrs. Wilkes face every morning, and what Athena did with her life was her business and her business alone.

Athena walked inside the house and placed her bag on the table. She shut off the three sets of alarms to stop the beeping that woke Caesar from his morning nap. He hopped down from the couch and trudged toward the door, his tail wagging with excitement. Caesar was a beige pug with a scrunched up face and short, boney legs. As far as he was concerned, he was in charge, the ruler of the house, more powerful than the man he was named after. Athena scratched him behind his ear, his favorite spot. The pug to wheezed in pure ecstasy.

She put her hair up in a messy bun, got out of her dirty clothes, and slipped on a bra and a fresh pair of underwear. That was one of the benefits of living alone, she could walk around her house with nobody to impress. Before she got Caesar, Athena lived alone in an apartment for a

few years. However, she liked her privacy, and hated the sound of her landlord knocking on her door month by month to collect rent. When she came home one night, she found him inside her apartment sifting through her underwear drawer. She let him keep his life in exchange for a few months' rent back, which she put towards purchasing her house.

She had an hour or two to herself before she had to get back out into the field. Her partner, Lily, was trailing their latest assignment while she ran home to grab a few hours to herself. It was a tough life, not getting much sleep and constantly watching over another person, but Davidson and Davidson paid her good money. Plus, as long as she had Lily by her side, she felt safe. Athena was convinced that if she didn't have Lily working on assignments with her, she would have been long dead by now. Athena was fairly tall, about 5'7", but Lily was considerably shorter. She had brown eyes and brown hair, and a trio of freckles forming a triangle on her left cheek.

Athena sprawled out on the couch with a blanket and her laptop and prepared to watch *Sin City* on the big screen. She would not move a muscle until she absolutely had to.

When she lifted her laptop, her last assignment's Facebook page was up and displayed. She must have forgotten to shut down before leaving the day before. His picture was him and his wife at some fancy party they attended. She was considerably better looking than he was, but he was the one who made the money. His name and information ran down the side of the page.

[Brian Kozak](#), Works at Law Offices of McGivens and Kozak, Studied at NYU, Lives in Chatgrove City, Married to [Brittney Kozak](#).

His latest status was posted less than an hour before. It read: "Can't wait for the party tonight at [John Whitney's](#)".

Society made her job so easy. People love to broadcast everything they are doing at any

given moment, without the slightest idea of who is paying attention. Athena always paid close attention, and Brian Kozak gave her all the information she ever needed to tail him around Chatgrove City despite any attempts he made to stay anonymous.

She grabbed her cell and called Lily, who was sitting outside of the Law Offices of McGivens and Kozak at that very moment in her bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle. Lily had always thought the best way to remain unnoticed was to draw as much attention to herself as possible. That way, people wouldn't think she was up to anything. It had worked for her so far. She had to turn down the radio to answer the phone.

"Hey gorgeous," Lily said, "You've only been away from me for a half hour, and you're already worried enough to check in?"

Athena laughed and said: "You can take care of yourself."

"Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself because I'm bored as shit over here. Kozak hasn't moved at all. A few of his usual clients have come in and out of the building, but nothing worth noting."

"Have you checked his Facebook page within the past hour?" Athena asked.

"No, why?"

"I think so," Athena said, "He's going to a party tonight at John Whitney's mansion."

"The investor?"

"Yeah, it's a private party, but you have to think tonight's the night."

"Big house, big crowd, big event," Lily said.

"Exactly."

"How are we going to get in though?"

"I think I have an idea," Athena said, "Let me get back to you. You alright by yourself for

another hour or so?"

"You know me, baby," Lily said.

When Athena hung up, she shut down her laptop and got up off the couch to go get herself dolled up. Caesar's ears perked up thinking Athena was getting up to get him food. "Sorry Caesar, Mommy has to get back to work," she said. He sunk his head back into the cushion of the couch.

She made her way into her bathroom to redo her face. She washed it clean before applying just the right touch of lip gloss, eye shadow, and blush. She put on another tight, black tank top and jean shorts, a combination that no man she had ever tried to seduce had been able to resist.

If there was anyone on John Whitney's guest list that had yet to have a date to the party, it was Brian Kozak's business partner, Benjamin McGivens. Ben McGivens was a strange little man that Athena and Lily had looked into when they first started tracking Kozak. He was smarter than Brian by tenfold, but he didn't have nearly the people skills, nor the connections that Kozak had. He was about 6'2, but didn't weigh any more than 140 pounds and had long brown hair he wore in a ponytail down to the middle of his back. Despite his awkwardness, he was a great lawyer, one of the founders of McGivens and Kozak, and he would surely have an invite to the party, despite the widespread disdain towards him by the high members of society and his complete and utter oblivion of it.

Athena said goodbye to Caesar and drove her Camaro to Mary Lou's, the coffee shop that McGivens usually went to in the early afternoons. She sat in her car, puffing on a cigarette and staring at the clock. She knew McGivens was good for at least 3 or 4 cups a day, and her time paid off when she noticed his Cadillac pull into the parking lot.

She threw her cigarette on the ground and stomped on it before moving into Mary Lou's. He held the door open for her, and she said: "Why thank you, what a gentleman" with an alluring half smile.

"My mother taught me good manners, I guess," McGivens said, awkwardly.

"I guess she did," Athena said, "Jessica." She held out her hand for a delicate handshake.

"Ben," he said, "Very nice to meet you."

"You as well," she said, turning her back to him towards the direction of the line. She knew he would give chase. They always did.

"It was really that easy?" Lily asked on speakerphone. She was back at her house doing the same thing that Athena was doing at hers, getting ready for one of the biggest nights in both of their careers.

"C'mon, Lil. That guy hasn't had a girl like me talk to him in his life. All it took was a push-up bra."

"You're terrible!" she said jokingly, "He must have felt like the man when you told him you had a friend who wanted to join, too."

"Of course," Athena said, "Just needed to plant the image in his head of him walking into Whitney Mansion with a girl on each arm and it was hook, line, and sinker."

"Great job as always," Lily said, "Go finish getting ready. I'll be there in twenty."

Athena put her hair up in an easy way her mother taught her, with two sharp silver chopsticks that made her look like a ruby-haired princess. She had an expensive green dress, something for whenever she needed to work high end parties. It was gorgeous and made her bright hair and tattoo go from suspicious to stylish in no time.

The women met Ben McGivens at Buster's Bar and Grille for a few drinks before they went to John Whitney's mansion, per his request. Why they would meet to pregame for a party with an open bar, Athena did not know, but McGivens was their ticket in to the place so they were playing by his rules. Lily was wearing a tight blue sequin dress, and McGivens a black and white tuxedo and bow tie. Athena was worried about leaving Brian Kozak alone for so long, but Lily reassured her that he was safe.

"He's at his house with his wife and kids getting ready, babe," she said, "Why would they strike there when they could do it at the party? Like we said, big crowds and big places. That's what those guys thrive on."

Athena never knew how or why she and Lily got the people they did as their assignments. Granted, they didn't even know what their job really was. Whenever someone asked her what her profession was, she would just flash them a smile and tell them she worked for the government, but all she really knew was that she kept important members of society alive and was paid extremely well for it. She'd only met the Davidson brothers once, and that was the day she tried out for the position. She was hired the next day.

Her bosses didn't disclose much information at all, about themselves or the assignments. Athena didn't know how many employees they had working in the city or who determined who was awarded protection. All she knew was that every few months she would get a card in her mailbox, sealed in an envelope. The card would have a person's name, an age, status, and a few other minor details to help them start investigating. It wouldn't take Athena very long to connect the dots.

A quick scan of Kozak's Facebook told Athena that he was a lawyer, and a very rich one at that. McGivens and Kozak took on some of the highest profile cases in the city and were

considered some of the best in the business. She scoured the internet for his last case and it didn't take her long to find an article on the case that was posted on the Chatgrove City Free Press website. He was the representative for Gus Drilles, who had just recently been brought in on murder and conspiracy charges. Kozak caused the witness to shake a bit on the stand, and Gus got off with nothing but a slap on the wrist. As the story unfolded, she realized the murder that Gus was charged with took place at a meeting between his crew, the Gentlemen's Club, and a small group of Donald "Ace" Garbaccio's crew, the GreenBacks. It was no wonder somebody wanted him killed.

About a week into her investigation, Gus Drilles wound up in a ditch on the side of the highway, about 13 miles away from the center of the city. His arms and legs were tied together, while his mouth was stuffed with a handkerchief dosed in gasoline, and duck taped. The newspaper said that he'd been shot in the back of the head, but she hacked into the hospital records and found the autopsy. He had been hit over the head with a wooden baseball bat, and then left in the ditch. He lay covered in dirt for 28 hours, with the sound of every passing car slowly draining his hope of survival. His death brought a swift and violent end to the Gentlemen's Club, making the Green Backs the most dominant force in organized crime in Chatgrove City.

And Athena and Lily knew that Brian Kozak was next to die.

"So what are you ladies drinking tonight?" McGivens asked as the three of them sat down at the bar, "It's on me."

"You don't really have to do that," Lily said.

"Oh, c'mon," he said, "I invited you guys here, and I'm paying for the drinks." He pulled

a wad of cash out of his pocket and counted it for no apparent reason.

The bartender came over. “Hey, welcome to Buster’s! Can I get you guys something to drink?”

“I’ll have a Blue Moon draft and two golden margaritas for my girls here.”

“You got it,” the bartender said, and she walked away to make their drinks.

“We appreciate the gesture,” Athena said, “But you really don’t have to buy our drinks.” She knew that as long as McGivens was buying them, he would keep the liquor coming, and she couldn’t afford to be impaired in any way. Not tonight.

“Well, beautiful,” he said, “When you make over 400,000 dollars a year, you can pretty much pay for anything you want.” He looked her up and down and said: “And I mean anything.”

The bartender returned with their drinks and McGivens told her to keep them coming.

Athena had done quite a bit of boozing in her young life, so she could handle the four or five margaritas that Ben McGivens was putting in front of her. Lily, however, was never much of a drinker. Athena saw her becoming less and less aware of the amount of alcohol she was sipping on. After three margaritas, Athena saw the gloss in Lily’s eyes and her Irish complexion become red and warm. She decided to pull her into the bathroom.

“Lily and I are going to freshen up, and then we’ll be on our way,” she said to McGivens.

“Take your time,” he said with a devilish smile.

The pair walked into the bathroom in the back of Buster’s and were, luckily, the only two in there.

“What are you doing out there?” she asked her partner.

“What do you mean?” Lily said, “I’m actually having a great time!” Her speech was slightly slurred, and she stumbled into the stall.

“We have a job to do tonight, Lil. Where is your professionalism? It’s almost 9:30! Kozak will be getting to the party any minute now, and you’re drunk! Maybe I should just go myself. I’ll tell McGivens you aren’t feeling well.”

Lily flushed the toilet and came out looking Athena directly in the eye. She grabbed the back of her neck with both hands and said: “I’m not going to let you do that. We’re a team, and I would never let you go in there alone. I’m fine! I promise.”

Lily leaned in with her eyes closed, and mixed her hot pink lipstick with Athena’s fire red.

“Are you sure?” Athena asked, skeptical.

“I’m positive, but I appreciate you looking out for me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

They exited the bathroom and McGivens was finishing up his last beer. They walked out to the parking lot, but when Athena started walking toward her car, McGivens stopped her and offered to drive. She told him she wasn’t comfortable leaving her car at Buster’s and that she and Lily would follow close behind in her car. She walked away before he had the opportunity to give some sort of witty response.

On the car ride over, Athena and Lily were silent. Athena was getting into her zone. It was time to go to work. But Lily’s mind was elsewhere. Athena felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She felt like she was going to vomit. She felt like the situation she was walking into could jeopardize both her and Lily’s careers, but she couldn’t turn around and go home. Not now. It was far too late. A man’s life was on the line. Her only option was to show up at the party and do what she had done dozens of times before and pray for the best. Her talent would have to make up for any hindrance they encountered.

John Whitney's mansion was just a few miles away, located on the far Northside of town. It was said that the Whitney mansion was about the farthest North you could get without leaving Chatgrove City. It's long, winding driveway ran down the hill to the street far below. That driveway was already lined with cars when McGivens and the girls arrived.

"Well, I guess this is it," Athena said, "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Lily said.

"Do you have your gun on your leg?"

"Of course I do," Lily said, "Relax. We'll be fine."

McGivens shut the door to his Cadillac and walked confidently over to Athena's driver-side door. He adjusted his bow tie and stuck one hand in his pocket. He opened the door for Athena and smiled as if he was doing her some grand gesture. She gave him a smile back that was as equally fake.

The three made the short walk up the driveway, McGivens in the center, and knocked on John Whitney's front door.

"Oh, you're here," John Whitney said as he opened the door, "I was wondering if you were going to show up."

"Sorry we're late," McGivens said, "but the pre-party went a little longer than expected, if you know what I mean." He leaned forward and gave a suggestive half smile to Whitney, keeping both hands in his pockets. Whitney rolled his eyes.

"So aren't you going to introduce me to your, um, friends?"

"Geez, where are my manners?" McGivens said, "This lovely lady is Jessica," Athena smiled and shook John Whitney's fragile hand. He was an older man, upwards of 70, and was the most successful investor Chatgrove City had seen in recent memory. His fortune was growing by

the second, and he had nothing to do but sit on his couch and watch the checks pile in.

“Thank you for having us,” Athena said.

“In this fine angel is Fiona.” Lily didn’t say anything, just shook Whitney’s hand and smiled without showing teeth.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Whitney said, “It’s nice to finally see Ben bring a few guests that actually look the part. But, please, enjoy yourselves. There are refreshments at the bar, but I can see you’ve all started already.”

Athena and Lily walked into the mansion, with McGivens and Whitney close behind them. McGivens was talking Whitney’s ears off about God knows what, and the old investor didn’t seem the slightest bit interested. Once they were inside, their focus was entirely devoted to finding Brian Kozak in the sea of the rich and famous members of Chatgrove City’s upper class.

Lily was the first to spot him. He was talking to Simon Taylor, a member of Chatgrove City’s City Council, on the far side of the room, laughing and sipping on expensive champagne. Athena let her shoulders relax, relieved that he was still alive, but she knew their job was far from over. He laughed a fake laugh and slapped Simon on the arm, before shaking his hand and heading towards the large staircase in the center of the dining room.

“If you could just excuse us one moment,” Athena said to the men, “Fiona and I are going to go find a bathroom.”

“It’s right upstairs,” Whitney said, “Take your time.”

“C’mon Fi,” she said, and she grabbed her partner’s arm to drag her along.

She noticed two waiters in black and white tuxedos place their full trays on a table and begin climbing those same stairs toward where Kozak left their sight. She quickened her pace a bit, and Lily was close behind her.

She grabbed a shot off of one of the abandoned trays and threw it down her throat. She crept slowly up the stairs, checking her peripherals occasionally. The steep set of stairs led to a long hallway. It was just light enough to see and dark enough to hide. One of the waiters had sensed her presence following them and darted out from behind a wall, knife in hand. She grabbed the man's lunging arm with her left hand, and pulled one of her metal chopsticks out of her hair with her right. Her scorching locks fell down her back as she drove the pointed end into the waiter's neck. She swirled it around before dragged his limp body into the bathroom, out of sight.

If Lily was sober, she would've remembered that she and Athena did everything as a team. She would've remembered never to rush into a situation without thinking it through first. She would've remembered that two sets of eyes and ears are better than one. She would've followed Athena into the bathroom, and they would've strategically planned their next move. But Lily did none of those things. Out of a sense of desperation, or some misplaced heroism, Lily made a break down the hallway after Brian Kozak and his attacker, and when Athena heard a gunshot, she knew the worst.

#### Chapter Fourteen: Penetrating Boundaries

Packer was one of the first fifty people at the parade, and he got himself as close to the departure point as possible. He was wearing a navy button down and some khaki pants in an attempt to look as bland and ordinary as possible. On his chest he wore a pass that read, "Jonathan Jones, Chatgrove City Free Press, Photographer." Athena had printed it out and laminated it for him that morning. It looked official enough that nobody would ask any questions, yet it wasn't flashy enough to draw too much unwanted attention. He held a camera in

his hands and pretended to take pictures of the crowd and of the floats as they prepared to leave. He also held a small camera bag over his shoulder that contained everything he would need to hack into the big screen on Benjamin McGivens' float.

Once the crowds started piling in, it became much easier for Packer to blend in and walk around. The people started to push him away from the front, but every time someone would try to get past him he would hold up his press pass, and they would back off. He had never felt that kind of power in his life.

The streets of Chatgrove City were littered with McGivens' campaign flyers which he had his team tape to building walls by the hundreds. It was a big picture of his face, smiling, holding up two peace signs by the sides of his head in an attempt to look hip and attract the young voter. It was one of the fakest looking things that Packer had ever seen, and he wanted nothing more than to draw all over it.

The closer it got to 11:15, the more nervous he became. The camera slid around in his hands from the sweat, and he shook out his shirt with his pointer finger and his thumb. He had no idea how he was going to get access to McGivens' float, and started to wonder why he even volunteered to do so. He was so desperate to prove himself, to become a key member of the organization. He was the youngest and always had a bit of a chip on his shoulder because of it. He always felt as if Dennis, Athena, and Jimmy never asked for his input when making decisions, and that Colt and Jet just put up with him because he was their younger brother. He didn't just want to be a cheerleader. He wanted to get in the game, so when the opportunity arose for someone to put on a fake badge and head over to Freedom Avenue, he raised his hand carelessly.

Sheriff Bailey had officers walking up and down the sides of the street, which were blocked off by portable fencing. The Sheriff patrolled Packer's area himself, since it was so close to the floats. He casually walked up and down the fencing, running his hand along it, his cowboy hat atop his head and his uniform as sharp as ever. The Sheriff's eyes make contact with his own, and Packer saw the man begin to move quickly towards him. He looked away, and tried to duck into the crowd but it was too crowded to move. He was stuck.

"Chatgrove City Free Press, huh?" Sheriff Bailey asked him.

"Who, me? Yeah. Just taking some photographs for the paper," he fidgeted with his counterfeit badge, feeling a lot less confident than he had just a moment ago. Why did he ever think this would work? It was a shitty excuse for a badge they made on Microsoft Word that morning. Surely the Sheriff knew what a real badge looked like.

"Well, make sure you get some good ones," the Sheriff said. "What kind of camera are you using?"

"A Nikon, D3100," Packer read off of the back of it.

"Can I take a look?" The Sheriff grabbed the camera out of Packer's hand before he had a chance to answer. "I may not look like it," he said, "but I'm quite the fan of photography when I'm not catching bad guys. I'm just an amateur though. I still have trouble with my Olympus."

The Sheriff held the camera up to his face and said "Smile!" He snapped a photograph of Packer, smiling awkwardly. The Sheriff handed the camera back to him and chuckled.

"What kind of shutter speed you using once the floats get moving?" he asked.

Packer had absolutely no idea. He had taken photography class as a freshman in high school, but he didn't remember how shutter speed was measured. Hell, he didn't even remember

what shutter speed was. He was busted. The Sheriff was an amateur photographer? Who would have guessed?

“Uhm...” he froze, looking at his camera as if it would spit the answer up to him, but he had no idea what to say. The best he could come up with was “It varies from picture to picture.” The Sheriff didn’t look like he was going to buy it. He maintained eye contact with Packer and spit on the ground. Then he turned to the side and pulled his walkie-talkie out from his belt.

Packer began to assess his surroundings to determine which direction would be his best escape route. If he turned and ran up Freedom Ave with the parade, he would undoubtedly run into more officers that the Sheriff would alert by radio. If he ran down Freedom Ave, he would run into massive amounts of press that would surely get his face on camera and have him caught within the hour. He would have to sprint away from it all, and find an alleyway that would lead him as far away from the commotion as possible.

But then, finally, as Packer prepared to run, the Sheriff cracked a half smile, and said: “That’s how I know you’re a professional. I would usually just set it to one speed and take a bunch of pictures. No wonder some come out better than others! I have a lot to learn. I guess that’s why I’m out protecting civilians instead of taking pictures of them.”

Packer chuckled in disbelief. He just dodged that bullet. He knew that if an opportunity was to present itself, this was it. He had to stop being nervous. He had to stop being afraid. He took a deep breath and calmed his nerves. He had a job to do.

“You know, Sheriff,” he said, “I have people banging into me from all sides, and I can hardly keep a steady hand to get the shot. Plus the view from over here is shitty to say the least. Is there any chance you can let me inside the fence? I’d be able to get some killer shots from close up. You can’t make magic happen with boundaries.”

The Sheriff thought for a second. Packer could tell he didn't want to; it would jeopardize his entire operation, but Packer knew he got to him with all that talk of boundaries and hindered artists, whatever that means. He held back a smile as he saw the Sheriff begin to cave. He reached for his radio, and whispered something fast into it that Packer couldn't understand. He finally said: "Come with me," and pushed aside one of the fences so that Packer could just barely fit through. One of his officers held back the crowd. The Sheriff told Packer to make sure he got some good shots of the Police Department for the paper, and, as always, to stay safe.

Packer looked down at his watch. It was 11:09: six minutes.

He put his camera up to cover his face and started snapping photographs of everything; the floats, the crowd, and decorations that covered the streets. At the Sheriff's request, he got some nice shots of the Chatgrove City P.D. doing nothing but walking around with their hands on their hips and yelling at people who were climbing on trees to get a better view of the candidates. Smiling children stood atop their parent's shoulders, and the buildings on Freedom Avenue had people flooding out of their vast rows of windows looking down on it all. The day before the election was a holiday, and it was treated that way. Packer knew that everyone in the city was going to finally see the Raven firsthand.

Over by the floats, campaign teams were making last minute adjustments. Packer saw Mayor Audycki smiling and shaking hands with everybody around. Standing by his side was his son, who Packer had met a few days ago when he threw a temper tantrum in their first meeting and stormed off. He hated the way his face looked. He was the type of guy that never had to work for a thing in his life. He was born with a Cadillac parked in the driveway with his name on it, and he got copped expensive meals at restaurants Packer wasn't allowed into just for being the Mayor's kid. He was the type of guy Packer had known from high school, guys who used their

size and last name to intimidate, even though they don't have an ounce of fight in them. That's what set Packer apart from him. He had all the fight in the world, and that's why he was the one holding a bag of video equipment and not the one wearing the shirt and tie. There was no doubt in his mind which one of those he wanted to be.

When Packer finally spotted the challenger, McGivens was standing in front of a camera with his sunglasses on, yapping away with some TV reporter. Packer heard him say something about raising \$2.6 billion dollars through investments or something like that. He had a cane slung over his shoulder. It peaked Packer's interest. It had diamonds running up the sides, must have been worth upwards of forty grand. He made it a personal goal of his to get his hands on it someday, to pry it from his fingers, but that day was not going to be today. He had more important things to worry about.

While McGivens' was focused on saying all the right things to the camera, Packer saw his moment. Noone even noticed Packer get closer and closer to McGivens' float, suddenly darting underneath the massive structure. The black skirting that ran all the way around kept the Packer invisible to both candidates and their troops.

When he was finally underneath, he remembered what Athena had told him: "Look for the trail of wires that leads up to the video receiver. They will be red, yellow, and white, and will most likely be weaved together like braided hair so they don't get tangled."

Packer heard a huge wave of cheers from the crowd, and looked down at his watch. It was 11:15. The Mayor had just departed from port.

A drop of sweat fell from his head and hit the cool ground underneath him. His hands were shaking as he traced his fingers over wire after wire. He knew he had less than three minutes, and the clock was ticking. He finally saw what looked like the weave of wires that

Athena had described to him, and he followed the trail like a private detective all the way to the back of the float. He pulled a splitter out of his bag. It had a plug for the wires and three wires of its own. He unplugged the wires from the front carefully, plugged the red, yellow, and white back into the splitter, and then plugged the cords that ran from the splitter into the empty plugs. The light on the device turned red, and he knew it was ready. If Athena knew what she was talking about, the splitter would reroute the video back to the camera Dennis had set up in the warehouse. The breath he had been forgetting to exhale escaped from his lungs. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the pavement, his job so close so being done.

As soon as his heart beat began to slow, he heard the motor rev up and ready itself for its march across the city. His eyes shot open as he heard a loud roar come from the loud speakers, and the crowd hollered even louder than they did when the Mayor's departed. Packer looked down at his sneakers, made sure they were still tied tight, double knotted, and got ready to run.

As the float began to pass above him, Packer felt the glare of sunlight strike him in the face. He heard someone say, "Hey! Hey you!" and begin to move towards him. He bolted up as fast as he possibly could and ran toward the crowd. He jumped the fencing, threw his hood over his head, and ran. The camera strap got stuck on the chain fence as he leapt it, and tugged away from him. The camera fell behind him, but he didn't have time to turn back for it. He knocked an older woman off her feet but didn't stop to apologize. He ducked into a back alley and looked back over his shoulder for the first time. Whoever had been chasing him seemed to have given up. He pulled his phone and his clicker out of his bag, and sent a text to his oldest brother.

"30 seconds."

Back at the warehouse, Dennis sat in front of a brand new video camera that Athena had bought with cash. Athena and Jet had set up an all-white background, adding definition to the purple and black mask that covered the top half of his face. You could see Dennis' chin, and Athena noticed how rigid and defined it was. No matter how intimidating he looked, she wanted the people to know there was a man behind that mask, a man with a purpose.

Athena had advised the Raven to rehearse whatever speech he was going to give to the people, but she hadn't seen him write anything down. He was still hung over from their party the night before, and he looked it. But Dennis wasn't dumb enough to improvise his first public appearance. She was sure of that.

"Everybody ready?!" Colt yelled from the television, "You're on in 20!"

"You're the man, D, you got this," Jet said, "Just calm down and say what we went over."

"They'll find the splitter pretty fast," Athena said, "You probably have 15 seconds to say what you need to say, so make it quick."

"I'm going to destroy him," the mask responded, "Count down from 5, Jet."

Jet was standing behind the camera and counted down with his fingers.

5...4...3...2...1...

"People of Chatgrove City," he started, "My name is the Raven, and I want you to know that I am one of you. Don't be scared; Benjamin McGivens is the guy you should be scared of. Why do we give so much power to money? Is that really what we look for in a Mayor? Oh, and Mr. McGivens, I have an ultimatum for you," he paused, "Drop out of the race, or I'll personally make sure to cut your head off myself." It was in that moment that Athena knew that she and Dennis would never be together in harmony.

Dennis finished it off with “Enjoy the rest of the show!” but the phrase “of the show” didn’t make it on screen. One of the McGivens’ men found the splitter Packer had set and ripped it out, causing the big screen to cut to black. Colt watched it happen on the television in the other room.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Athena said.

“What?!” Jet answered for him, “I thought he nailed it.”

“You’re threatening to cut his head off?!” she yelled, “You were supposed to preach to the people, not threaten McGivens! When did this become all about him?”

Dennis stood up out of his chair and got eye level with her: “He needs to know we’re coming for him,” he said, “And I was talking to the people. I was making sure they didn’t vote for the wrong guy tomorrow.”

“So what if they do?!” She said, “I mean, what the fuck, Dennis? This was about making our presence known in the city, not about swaying the election. I didn’t know the Raven was so into politics.”

“Of course he is!” Jet jumped in, “We’re here to better Chatgrove City, and the easiest way to do that it is to start at the top and let it trickle down.”

“I’d have to agree with the lady,” Jimmy said. He’d been sitting on chair by the card table shuffling the deck in silence the whole time. They had forgotten he was even there.

“Finally, somebody who has some street smarts around here,” Athena said, “Go ahead, Jim.”

“You’re talking like you have an army when you barely have a gang. Do you honestly think that if Ben McGivens knew that Dennis Lopes was the Raven he wouldn’t have your head on a stake within the day? Within the hour? You know he’s got his goons out there looking for

me as we speak, because unlike you, I wasn't wearing a mask last night. He knows I know who you are, and you just told him you were going to cut his head off! That doesn't bode well for me, or for any of us."

"He doesn't know that we're involved," Colt said, looking Jet, "Does he?"

"Depends how careful that little brother of yours was today!" Jimmy fired back.

"Shut up, Jim!" Dennis yelled, "Packers fine. He did his job. He sent us the text, and he's probably on his way back as we speak. Everybody needs to calm down. I won't let anything happen to us. We'll just need to lay low for a while. I can handle anybody who comes knocking."

"Anybody?" Athena questioned, "Who have you gotten the better of so far? A couple of make believe gangsters? Wait until McGivens gets the Army and Marines to come knocking. You're going to get yourself killed, Dennis! You're going to get all of us killed."

"Why the hell are you worrying about me for anyways?" he yelled, "I can take care of myself."

Packer came running through the door, out of breath.

"They loved it!" he said.

"They did?" Jet asked.

"They did..?" Jimmy echoed.

"You should have seen the crowd when Dennis came on screen. They didn't know what to think! And then when he said that line about cutting McGivens' head off, they lost it. You should have seen it. Everybody's talking about the Raven. I wish I could have stuck around long enough to see the look on McGivens' face."

"See?" Dennis looked over at Athena, "I told you everything would be alright."

"Where's my camera?" she asked the kid, never turning her attention to Dennis.

“The strap snapped while I was making a getaway, and I lost it,” he said, “I’m sorry but I couldn’t turn back for it without getting caught. I’ll buy you another one, promise.”

But that was the least of her concerns.

“C’mon Jimmy,” she said, “We have some work to do. If we want to keep any of us alive, we’re going to need to gain some numbers.” She grabbed a purple marker, threw her hood over her head, and headed for the door. Jimmy was close behind her. He shook his head and sighed before he shut the warehouse door behind him.

## Chapter Twenty: The College Graduate

Franklin Mitchell had the potential to take over the world, or at least become a gifted contributor to it. He graduated from St. Paul University with a 3.98 GPA in political science. He was still bitter about the A- that lost him his perfect 4.0. Both his mother and father graduated from St. Paul in the 80’s, and they had the highest aspirations for their son.

Before he left his house that morning, he grabbed the brown bag lunch his mother made him off of the island in his kitchen, and kissed her on the cheek as he did every morning. Sheila Mitchell was now a stay at home mom. She was able to retire early from her optometry career thanks to her husband’s financial success as a Neurosurgeon. Franklin was her oldest son, 21, but he was still her baby. Franklin’s younger brother Harry, however, was her full-time job. He was 15 years younger than Franklin, and named after the 33<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States. Franklin, of course, was named after the 32<sup>nd</sup>.

“Harry!” he yelled up the stairs, “I’m leaving!”

Harry ran down the stairs at a frantic pace, skipping the last three steps with a jump. Franklin picked him up under his arms and lifted him high in the air.

“What time will you be home?” Harry asked his older brother.

“Not till 5 or 6,” Franklin said, “I have school and then I have to go in to work.”

“Aw man,” the boy said, “Will you beat the level I’m stuck on in *Lego Lord of the Rings* when you get home? I can’t beat the Cave Troll.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but keep trying after school and I know you can beat it. You’re the man.”

“You’re the man,” Harry said as he made a gun with his hand and pointed it at Franklin’s head.

“It’s time for you to get ready for school, too, little guy,” their mother said, “Your brother is going to be Mayor one day, and if you want a spot on his cabinet you’re going to need to learn how to read!” She smiled at Franklin and said, “Have a good day today. I’ll have supper ready for you when you get home.”

“I might be a little late,” he said, “I have to stop by the Mayor’s office after school.”

Franklin had been working for Mayor McGivens for three weeks now. Being the personal assistant to the Mayor right out of college was the perfect job for Franklin. It was tough to make it in politics without knowing the right people, and it was the perfect scenario for him to both make connections and get some experience. It turned out, however, to be much more than he anticipated.

He had a 40 minute commute to campus, but he didn’t mind the ride in the least. It was a time for him to listen to NPR and collect his thoughts, but as of late, it was a place for him to reflect on his guilt for not stepping in the night that Mayor Audycki was killed. He knew McGivens was up to no good, that was for sure, but he didn’t think he would ever take it that far. Franklin also couldn’t help but think about how his own future would be affected by the incident.

If the truth ever surfaced, Franklin would have been an accomplice of one of the most hated men in the city and that would be a death sentence to his political future. No matter what position he ran for, he would constantly be bombarded with questions about the murder he was wrapped up in. He had no choice but to keep quiet and let the Raven take the fall. Franklin knew he could be the bad guy because he would never let himself get caught, and while he was out doing whatever he did in the city, Franklin would continue to assist McGivens in anything he asked of him, whether that was the right thing to do or not.

Franklin was taking three classes in his first semester of graduate school. His first class that morning was Political Philosophy, and was taught by a Professor by the name of Kevin Regan. There were twelve people in his class, but none with the enthusiasm at 9 AM that Franklin showed. While his classmates dressed in sweatpants and sweatshirts and congregated at the back of the classroom, Franklin sat himself in the second row in his button down shirt, tie, and dress pants. He took rigorous notes until his pen went dry.

Holly Michaels sat in the seat in front of him in Political Philosophy. He was in love with Holly Michaels. He loved the way her silky brown hair ran down to the center of her back. He loved the smell of her perfume as it drifted backwards into his nostrils. He loved when she raised her hand to ask a question and her sweater would drift up just enough for him to see the skin of her lower back and just the slightest bit of her baby blue underwear.

At the end of class, she spun in her chair and said: “Do you get this? I totally don’t get this.”

“It’s not too bad,” Franklin said, “I’ll go over my notes a few times, and I’ll understand it perfectly then.”

“I try to take notes,” she said, “But sometimes he talks to fast, and my pen just can’t keep up. I have to say, I’m awfully impressed that you can make sense of it all so easily.”

She was hitting on him. Was she hitting on him? He’d never spoken with Holly this long since he met her at the beginning of the semester. Quite frankly, he didn’t have enough experience of girls hitting on him to know if one was or wasn’t, so he decided to play it cool.

“You know,” he said, “I can make sense of the information in all of my classes at first listen.” That was a good response. She would be even more impressed now.

“Well you and I should meet up some time to study,” she said, “I could use the help.”

She was hitting on him. Was she hitting on him? In movies, when attractive girls asked to meet up and study it meant they wanted to “meet up and study,” but no girl had ever asked him to before. He didn’t want to be too aggressive, but he wanted her to know that he wanted her too. Deciphering Political Philosophy was nothing compared to deciphering Holly Michaels.

“I’d love to,” he said, “Can I have your number? I’ll text you sometime to meet up.”

“Sorry, my phone broke,” she said, “But here’s my email. You can let me know whenever you want to meet with me. I have to go, but I’ll see you on Thursday.”

She handed him a small piece of paper with “hmichaels@stpauls.edu” written in pink pen. She was hitting on him. He told himself he’d send her an email when he got home, and, tomorrow, they’d meet up in an empty part of the library where nobody would be around to bother them. He hoped she wore the blue underwear.

He walked to his second class with a skip in his step. He couldn’t get Holly of his mind, even in his favorite class, a 10:15 research seminar in International Relations. From 10:15-11:30, he rehearsed every possible conversation he’d have with Holly in the library the next day.

“Frankie,” she’d call him. Nobody ever called him Frankie, but she would. She’d sit on the same side of the table as him, wearing a low-cut shirt that showed just the right amount of cleavage as they bantered back and forth

“Frankie,” she’d say, “I have a confession. I didn’t really want to meet up with you to talk about Political Philosophy...”

“Oh really?” he’d say, acting surprised, “I thought you were worried about the test next Tuesday? It’s going to be tough.”

“I’m actually doing just fine in that class,” she’d say, “I was just looking for an excuse to get together with you. I’ve been wanting to do this all year long...” and then she’d lean in and kiss him, and the heavens would celebrate yet another perfect match. Once he was Mayor, she’d make for the most beautiful First Lady Chatgrove City had ever seen.

He had a break after his 10:15 class, as his third and final class of the day didn’t start until 1:00. So to pass the time, he put in his headphones and walked back to his car in the parking garage so he could drive somewhere to get lunch. 90% of the time it was fast food, but on the walk over he decided that it was a day for celebration, and that he’d sit down at the bar at Joe’s Diner and have himself a beer and a burger while chatting with the bartender about his new girlfriend and their bright future together

*How’s It Going to Be?* by Third Eye Blind played loud in his ears, and he sang along when getting into his car.

He played the drums on his steering wheel before reaching in his pocket to pull out his keys. As his hand made its way towards the ignition, a black bag suddenly fell over his head and tightened around his neck. He struggled for a brief moment before something hit him hard one time in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious.

When Franklin woke up, it was dark, but there was no longer a bag over his head. His hands were tied behind his back and his feet were tied together. He felt the engine roar and felt the bumps in the road. When his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he saw a pair of old tennis shoes of his he hadn't seen in a while, and he came to the realization that he had been thrown in the trunk, his trunk.

“Help!” he yelled as loud as he could, “Stop the car! Someone help me!”

He felt the car slow and pull over to the side of the road. At first he thought crying for help had worked but soon realized that last thing he wanted was to find out who was behind the wheel. He heard the footsteps creep around the car until the trunk popped open, and Franklin lay there silent and holding his breath.

Jimmy stood with one hand leaning on the trunk and the other on his hip. He made sure to pull his purple cloth over his nose and mouth to look as intimidating as possible. He knew the boy would recognize him as one of the Raven's men, and because of it, whatever he said, the boy would listen.

He knew out of all the members of the Raven's organization, he was the most fitted for this particular assignment. At first, Packer volunteered, but Packer had no idea how to break into a locked car. Athena volunteered as well, but she wasn't strong enough to get the boy's body weight from the passenger's seat to the trunk. Plus, Jimmy looked like any other hipster college student with his thick Ray-Ban sunglasses and disheveled hair, and he knew that as long as nobody saw him sticking his coat hanger down the crease between the door and the window, he'd be just fine. So Dycki and Jimmy tailed the boy to school that morning, and Dycki dropped

him off. He looked like he belonged, except instead of books, his backpack was filled with a coat hanger, a black bag, some rope, and a few guns for intimidation if he needed them.

“Now you listen to me, and you listen good,” Jimmy said as he peered down on the boy in the trunk, “If you make one sound before I get you inside, I swear on my life I will put a bullet in your head and not think twice about it.”

He lifted up his shirt, revealing his two handguns tucked into his jeans. Jimmy would never actually kill the kid. He was just a boy caught in the middle of a bad situation, but he knew that threatening Franklin’s life was the most efficient way to get him to listen.

“Now,” he went on, “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I can either drag you into the warehouse by your ankles or I can untie your feet, and you can walk in yourself. Option one or option two?”

“T-t-t-two, please,” Franklin said.

“That’s a good choice,” Jimmy said, “But you do know that if you try to run, you won’t make it three steps. Keep that in mind.”

Jimmy untied the rope that bound Franklin’s feet together and dragged him out of the trunk by his arm. He could feel the boy shaking, and he told him to relax.

“If you play this right,” Jimmy told him, “Nothing bad will happen to you. This is strictly a business meeting, alright? Now walk. You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Franklin walked slowly in front of Jimmy towards the door. He dragged the nine steps it took to get there out for at least 20 seconds until Jimmy had to give him a small push from behind. Once they approached the door into the warehouse, Jimmy opened it. Franklin stepped through the door and a fist clocked him in the side of the head, and he went right to the ground.

Jet and Dennis grabbed him by his arms and dragged him to a chair they had set up in the front of the room. They tied his hands and feet to the chair. Caesar barked at him.

“Caesar,” Athena said, “Shh!” and Caesar obeyed.

“Jesus Christ, guys,” Jimmy said, “He was walking in himself. You didn’t have to clock the guy.”

Franklin’s left eye had already begun to swell from the blow. Jet hit him hard, and he faded in and out of consciousness. Packer, Jet, Athena, Dycki, and Jimmy surrounded him. Crouched down eye level with Franklin, wearing his Raven mask, was Dennis. He shined a bright light onto Franklin’s face to keep him alert.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

Franklin said “What?” Dennis hit him across the jaw with an open hand.

“I said, do you know who I am?” he said.

“Everyone knows who you are,” Franklin said.

“On the contrary,” the Raven said, standing up from his crouch, “Nobody knows who I am. If everyone knew who I was, that would jeopardize this entire operation. But they don’t know who I am, now do they? They just know the mask. But I know who you are. Isn’t that right?”

“I-I-I guess so,” he said.

The Raven pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket, opened it up, and began reading: “Franklin Mitchell,” the Raven said, “Born January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1992. Graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from St. Paul’s University. Has a mother named Sheila and a father named Kevin. Was hired as the personal assistant to the Mayor going on about a month now. Sound correct so far?”

“Y-y-yes, sir.”

“Now you were there the night that Mayor Audycki died,” Dennis said, “I remember you curled up in the corner. And as I’m sure you’re aware, I should have six people standing behind me right now, but I only have five. One of my men was left behind, and after two-weeks of him missing, he finally turned up last night. Do you know where we found him?”

Franklin shook his head, no.

“It’s a funny story actually. One of my associates here found him hanging from the fire escape of the McGivens’ Cooperation with a message for me carved into his chest. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?”

Franklin looked down at the Raven’s boots.

“No, no, no,” Dennis said as he grabbed his face, “Look at me. What did McGivens do to him? And what did he tell him about us?”

“I told Mayor McGivens I wouldn’t say anything,” Franklin said.

“Alright, if you want to play it like that, fine. Somebody go get me the pliers. We’ll take one of his fingers off.”

“No!” Franklin yelled as he began to weep, “No, please, don’t! Please, don’t.”

Packer grabbed the pliers and threw them towards Dennis, who caught them out of the air and held them in front of Franklin’s face.

“Now talk. I want to know what they did to him, and I want to know what my associate told him. I know you were there. Talk.”

“Alright, alright. Your friend was out cold from the blow the Mayor gave him with his cane, and when the cops came in the room, the Mayor dragged him into a closet so they wouldn’t

find him. I don't know what they did with him after that. I heard the Mayor say they were going to get some answers out of him, but I don't know! I swear!"

"What answers did he give them?"

"I don't know. McGivens doesn't feel the need to tell me any of that stuff."

Dennis reached around to Franklin's tied hands and put one finger in-between the teeth of the pliers.

"Tell me what he said! Did he give me up?! Does McGivens know who I am?!"

"No!" Franklin yelled, "I swear! I don't know anything!"

"Chill out, Dennis!" Athena yelled, "He's telling the truth!"

He stood up from his crouch and got right in her face.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he asked.

"I said he's telling the truth," she said.

"You said my name," the Raven said, "Out loud."

"It's not a big deal," Packer said, "He probably didn't even hear it."

"Of course it's a big deal!" Dennis said, "He can go back and tell McGivens that the Raven's name is Dennis and then we're fucked!"

"I won't," Franklin said, "I swear. I won't say a word! I won't even tell him I was here! Just let me go and I'll quit my job and you'll never see me again, I promise! Please, just let me go..."

Dennis sighed and turned, before saying in a soft, menacing voice: "I'll give you one more chance to tell me what McGivens learned from my associate. One more chance."

Franklin hung his head and said: "I swear, I don't know anything."

Dennis sighed again and looked back at everyone else.

“Alright,” he said, “Somebody kill him.”

“What?!” Athena screamed. Jimmy and Packer echoed.

“No! Please!” Franklin yelled as he began to cry, “Please! Don’t! I won’t say anything!”

“Whoa, little bro,” Jimmy said, “You need to think about this.”

“This isn’t a game,” Athena said, “There’s no coming back from that.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” Jet spoke up for the first time, “My brother’s dead. Dycki’s father’s dead, and who’s dead on their side?”

“No one,” Dennis finished for him, “We have to let them know we’re just as serious as they are. We’re not going to get bullied by the Mayor’s games. He wants to torture and kill our men? Well, we can do the same.”

“I’m not going to be a part of this,” Athena said.

“You need to call that guy Frank,” Dennis said, “The one who specializes in disposal.”

“Fuck you, Dennis,” she said, “You’re on your own.” And she stormed out, Jimmy followed close behind her. Packer hesitated for a moment, but then went with them.

“I’ll do it,” Jet said, “Give me a gun.”

Dennis grabbed a gun and put a bullet in it and gave it to Jet.

“No! Please!” Franklin yelled, “What about my family?!”

“What about mine? You know that guy, the one that was dragged into the closet?” Jet asked, “That was my older brother. I was going to be the best man at his wedding later this year. So to be honest, I don’t give a damn about your family.” He pointed the gun at Franklin’s head and pulled the trigger. Caesar yelped at the loud noise and started to run around the room, barking in hysterics.

“Wow,” Dycki said from a distance, “I’ve never seen someone get shot like that before.”

The bullet went through Franklin's mouth and out the side of his head. A clump of his brains fell to the ground, and his head looked like a popped balloon.

"What are we going to do with him?" Jet asked.

"We're going to bury him in the back," Dennis said, "But we need something to throw the police off just in case the hounds come sniffing. There will be a missing persons report filed soon."

He grabbed a bow off the wall and put an arrow on the string. His target was all over the room, but he focused in and let it fly just at the right moment. It sailed across the room, and Caesar squealed as the arrow penetrated his neck. The pug's short, stinky body fell still on the floor, silent.

"Tonight, we're going to bury the body ten feet deep," Dennis said, "And cover it with dirt. And closer to the surface, we'll bury Caesar, so if anyone gets curious and decides to start digging, they'll find the dog and call it a false positive. Got it?"

Dycki and Jet nodded.

"Alright," the Raven said. He took his mask off.

"Grab some shovels."