

The Villains Series:
Book 1

The Fixer

LEE WINTER



Chapter 1

Office With No Name

THE FIRST TIME EDEN ACQUIRED an archnemesis, she had just turned twenty and was not exactly in the market for one. Although with a surname like Lawless, she supposed acquiring enemies might be more of a design feature than a bug.

Given Eden's main expertise lay in disrupting the status quo and organizing protests for good causes, perhaps it was almost inevitable.

Fun fact: Eden's first protest was in utero. Her mother, River, then eight months pregnant, fist punching the skies, hair whipping around her face, had been glowing when a photographer snapped her at a Save the Whales demonstration off the coast of Japan.

By age nine, Eden had done more sit-ins, night reclaimings, tree chainings, and placard waving than most children her age had scraped knees. So, by twenty, Eden had become adept at both the art of shaking up society and clinging to building faces, protesting her way to a college expulsion and one extremely cranky nemesis.

That event turned out to be highly relevant to why she was now sitting here, sixteen years later, in the fancy end of Washington DC, outside an office that had no name.

She'd pulled in here around midnight the previous night instead of stopping at her best friend's place as she normally would. Eden had wanted to be all set first thing this morning with a good parking

spot out front for Gloria—her tastefully rainbow-painted 2008 Dodge Sprinter 3500 van.

She never minded sleeping in Gloria, which was fitted out for that purpose. Eden's DIY reno work over the years had seen her add a sweet double bed, cute oven, compact high-end shower, toilet, and wall-mounted TV. But the outside was another matter.

Gloria looked vastly out of place in DC, tapestried as she was with faded stickers marking protest movements over the decades—championing rainforests, rights for women, POC, and the LGBT+, and... snow leopards. Eden really liked snow leopards.

Goddess, she was being distracted. Eden raked her fingers through her unruly hair, hoping it would behave for once, then peered back up at the building she had to visit in a few minutes.

So the big question was: Why did this office have no name? Wasn't that weird? Eden yanked her phone out of her corduroy jacket to read the email yet again.

Dear Ms. Lawless

My name is Arnold Clemmons. I'm a researcher for a consultancy firm.

Your name and skill set came up when I was investigating a project for my employer. We are seeking to recruit for a short-term assignment an individual who is both creative and clever, media savvy, IT literate, and able to disrupt the status quo through any legal means necessary.

The pay is generous and you would set your own hours. However, a nondisclosure agreement would need to be signed before any specifics are revealed as to this project or my employer's name.

I can say that the work would involve you being based in Wingapo, Maryland—your hometown, I believe. And it involves a person from your past who was fundamental in your career shift.

THE FIXER

If this interests you, I can set up a meeting with my employer at their office in Washington DC. A plane ticket and accommodation can be provided if you are out of the area. A street parking pass will be supplied if you require it.

Yours sincerely,

Arnold Clemmons

This job was about someone who'd been "fundamental in her career shift"? That could mean only one person: Francine Wilson. Now *Mayor* Francine Wilson, a.k.a. Eden's archnemesi.

But what did Francine have to do with some mysterious, secretive organization based in a glass tower in DC? And speaking of mysteries, what was its name?

Eden had assumed when she'd pulled up outside its address on M Street that she'd learn the name from simply looking at the door.

No such luck. It had no sign. Just an odd black symbol, like a stemless five-leaf clover. The tinted glass was too dark to see inside the foyer. A speaker sat next to the door. That was it.

Eden suddenly felt self-conscious. What was she even doing here? What skills could she possibly possess that fit in around here?

One way to find out. She leaped out of Gloria and strode up to the building.

She tugged the door. *Locked*. Then she pressed the speaker button.

A deep male voice replied: "Yes?"

"Um, hi? I'm Eden Lawless? I have an appointment—"

"Yes." The door clicked open.

The foyer was marble and the lighting dim, thanks to all those tinted windows. A black leather couch sat before a glass coffee table, a security counter, and two elevators. It was devoid of anything else.

An enormous guard who'd triple-dipped on his muscle allocation beckoned her to his desk. "I need some ID, Ms. Lawless."

Eden dug out her Maryland driver's license.

The guard pulled out a tablet, snapped a photo of the license, and then tapped some notes into his device. He pushed her license back along with a blank, white plastic card.

“Elevator pass,” he said. “Enter it into the slot inside the elevator. You will be met upon exiting. Good day, Ms. Lawless.”

Eden shortly found herself in a sleek metal cube, whisking up fast. There were no numbers, only double letters occasionally lighting up, indicating the passage of floors: MM, CE, CS, among others.

Before long, the doors opened at PS, and she stepped out onto a floor filled with wide windows and a stunning view. Okay, they were *really* high up. Was this the top floor? Maybe PS stood for Penthouse Suite?

A mid-twenties dark-skinned woman with the most exquisite eyebrows led Eden to another black leather couch. She oozed class with her stylish short Afro, manicured nails, and tailored gray skirt suit—definitely expensive.

She offered no name. “Your phone, Ms. Lawless? And any other recording devices.” The woman held out her hand.

Eden coughed up her battered phone.

The confiscation was “temporary,” the receptionist assured her while gingerly placing Eden’s device in a steel box beside her desk. She locked it with a soft *snick* sound.

Eden inhaled deeply. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

It reminded her of the time some oil executives had wanted to fly her to their headquarters in Texas for a “pleasant chat over lunch” about the way she’d made a campaign reporting unleaded gas’s possible links to cancer go viral. And she’d gone because why not? If she changed just one executive’s view, she’d be delighted.

The next day had been a shocking reality check when several oil corporations had released publicity photos of her lunching in style with their executives—living the high life, being a sellout, or so the material implied. Compromised. Even though she’d spent every minute arguing with them between bites of food she was too anxious to taste. Her environmentalist client had dumped her immediately.

Lesson learned.

Or was it? What did this nameless organization want with her? Had she just walked right into a complicated trap or a con—all because they’d dangled Francine Wilson in front of her?

If it was a con, it was an expensive one. Even the billionaire oil execs didn't have an office like this. Her gaze drifted from the stylized chrome door handles to the elegant matching light switches and the beautiful floor lamps in each corner curling over like metallic dancers touching their knees.

At the end of the room, taller than Eden, sat some sort of bronze Renaissance sculpture. It was of a female nude, shrouded in sculpted windswept cloth, face angled away, hair blown behind her. Astonishing how the cloth looked real and soft not metallic. Beautiful. And expensive. As in museum-exhibit expensive.

"You like it?" the receptionist asked, following her gaze.

"Um, sure? What is it?"

The woman's dark brown eyes leveled Eden with a long look. "*Vol Haut*. That's French. It means fly high."

Fly high. That about summed up this whole place. "Is it...um, classic? Some dead white Italian dude from the Renaissance era?" She could picture him already.

"*Chinese* sculptor Luo Li Rong made it, and *she* was born in 1980."

Eden gave a sheepish grin. Wrong on all counts, then. "Ah."

"But the sculpture is a classic," the receptionist conceded with a tiny sniff. "In my opinion, at least. Our CEO bought it from a gallery in France at the artist's last showing. There was a fierce bidding war for it."

So, the CEO had a ton of splash cash to blow on bronze nudes? Interesting. Eden wondered if he was some self-indulgent collector or simply a lech.

Her ears pricked up at the faintest noise. At first, Eden had thought she was hearing things, but, no, it was there: a faint, untidy hum. After ten more minutes of hearing it, she cleared her throat and glanced at the other woman.

The receptionist looked up pointedly at the latest interruption, an eyebrow high and arched. "Yes, Ms. Lawless?"

"Do you hear that noise?"

"Yes, Ms. Lawless," came the cultured reply without any further explanation.

Oh, for Christ's sake. "What on earth is it?"

“White noise,” the woman replied. “It is to facilitate higher productivity by muting sounds of others working and talking. Further,” she paused, as if for effect, “our particular white noise technology has a dampening field in it that will prevent any audio recording devices from working.”

Eden’s jaw dropped. “Is that even a thing?” She was quite well up on most tech thanks to IT once having been her field of study. This was new.

“I can assure you, Ms. Lawless, it is most definitely a...*thing*.” She returned to work.

Right, well, that shut Eden up—as intended, she had no doubt.

Time ticked on. What was taking so long? Was this some intimidation tactic? Show the minion who was boss? But why? They had actively sought her out, not the other way around.

She ran her hands down her good jeans, the black ones that didn’t obviously look like denim unless you touched them. Eden had no doubt she was wildly out of place here, which might explain the receptionist’s attitude. Probably didn’t see too many social agitators or Earth justice warriors around here.

Eden toyed with the thin chain at her neck. It had a round symbol representing Gaia—a flat tree in a circle, with curling, interconnected branches to signify Mother Earth. Her mom had given it to her before disappearing off to her latest protest, harassing supertrawlers overfishing in the North Sea. That had been over eighteen months ago. She’d kept extending her mission. Eden missed River every day.

She shifted her polished black boots and hunched further back into her jacket. It probably wasn’t the usual posh office interview look, but if they wanted Eden, this was what they got.

A door opened down the hall and a sixty-ish woman with graying blond hair made a beeline toward her. She was pleasantly plump and beautifully presented in a champagne-colored skirt and chiffon ivory blouse. Her confident walk and attitude were commanding. Eden was transfixed. She must be high up the company ladder, surely?

Then she smiled at Eden, which transformed her from imperious to maternal. Gone instantly was any hint of power, like a switch had flipped off.

THE FIXER

What an unusual effect. Eden stared in surprise.

"If you'll come this way, please, Ms. Lawless," she said. "Our CEO is ready to see you now."

CEO? She'd scored an interview with the CEO? "Sure." Eden shot to her feet. "Sure," she said again to the woman's now retreating back.

A few moments later, her escort knocked on a polished oak door, eased it open, and announced, "Ms. Lawless is here for her interview." She turned to Eden expectantly.

With a "thanks," Eden stepped through the door.

* * *

Eden looked around. The CEO's office was spacious, with yet another black leather couch by the window. Gray carpet felt plush and thick beneath her boots. The off-white walls were broken up by art prints; probably something bidding-war worthy too, but Eden knew even less about abstract art than she did bronze nudes.

Despite the art, everything seemed so...soulless.

The strange, soft, white-noise hiss was louder in here. Prickles went up Eden's neck.

She spun around to find a minimalist glass desk tucked away on one side of the room. It was not a remotely logical place to put a desk unless you needed your back to a solid wall. The office's rear was entirely wall-to-wall windows.

Behind the desk sat a woman in an immaculate navy blazer with a blindingly white shirt collar jutting high up her neck. Her dark-chestnut hair had been corralled into a tight ball low against her neck. That neck was hard to miss. Long and tapered, it came to a strong, firm jaw and proud chin. All her features were angular, like a goddess from a Grecian urn, especially her pointy chin and classically elegant, longer nose. Her high cheekbones, free of any makeup, were sharp as a blade. As was her impatient expression.

Eden's heart jumped, and her palms slicked at being caught gawking.

The woman shifted her hands from her keyboard to her desk, interlacing long fingers in front of herself; she regarded Eden as one might an insect that required assessment for pinning in a display case.

Those penetrating hazel eyes were so dark and intense that Eden indeed felt pinned in place.

She stopped in front of the desk.

The woman gestured for Eden to sit in an overstuffed black chair opposite, and she obeyed instantly.

Up close, the CEO was beyond intimidating. Her posture was fixed and straight, and there was so much stillness. Unusual. Eden was used to acquaintances and friends being loud, making themselves larger to fill spaces not typically designed for them. But this woman, lean and compact though she was, seemed to effortlessly fill her whole office. So much authority.

“Thank you, Tilly,” the woman suddenly said. Her voice was low, no-nonsense, and almost curt.

Eden’s escort merely nodded, exiting with an effortless grace.

Okay, so the possibly personal assistant was Tilly. Eden was relieved someone around here had a name. She hoped the intimidating CEO would introduce herself now too.

“I trust you found us okay,” the woman said instead, voice soft and almost faintly amused. “Not everyone does.”

There was something so cool about how she spoke, as if she barely bothered speaking much at all and the listener should feel fortunate to be graced with an audience.

“Well, I’m not surprised,” Eden said, settling back a little in the chair. “Your office has no name. You just have some weird, squishy, little round logo.”

“It’s a pentalobe. And no, there’s little point having a secret organization and then emblazoning our name across the office.”

“Why not just use a fake name?” Eden asked, warming to the topic. She leaned forward. “Like Humboldt Industries.”

“Humboldt...” the woman’s look became perplexed. “What on earth is that?”

“Exactly.” Eden spread her hands out as if sharing her genius idea with the world. “Nothing. But it sounds like something. Right? Maybe you make cheese? Maybe you don’t. Who can say?”

The other woman stared at her for long enough that Eden began to squirm. “Cheese,” she finally muttered.

“Yeah.” Eden trailed off at the woman’s pinched expression. “Never mind, then.”

The woman apparently gave up on any pretense at interest in the topic and leaned back. “I’m curious about something. You were offered free accommodation in a top hotel and a flight here if you needed it. You declined both and only accepted the parking pass. Why?”

“Maybe I was in the neighborhood,” she said lightly.

“You weren’t. My researcher said you were doing work in Ohio campaigning for nurses this week. So, you drove seven hours to attend an interview when you could have arrived in style and well-rested. I ask again, why?”

How could the researcher know that? Eden didn’t advertise her clients or her whereabouts. Maybe one of the nurses had tagged her in something on social media? It was creepy how knowledgeable these people were about her, especially given how little she knew in return.

Eden eyeballed the woman watching her impassively. “Because I like to know who I’m dealing with before I take favors. That way I don’t end up beholden to someone down the track that I’d rather not be.” Lesson learned from those Texan oil execs. *Fool me once...*

The woman gave a faint nod of what looked a lot like approval. “Understandable.” She smiled. “Tell me, what did you think of the bronze in the main office?”

“The nude?” Eden clarified.

“*Was* she nude?” The woman tilted her head.

Good question. Did having sculpted transparent gauze all over you make you naked or not? “Yes.”

The CEO regarded her impassively. “Interesting. See, I’d argue no. She has a covering of the cloth, even if one can see through it.”

“It’s irrelevant as a covering if it’s of no use.”

“It’s of use to her. *She* might find it useful in some way. Maybe it gives her confidence. Or it’s her mask? Or distracts us from something else she hides?”

The hell? Eden blinked at her. “She’s *nude*,” she enunciated, then stared at her incredulously.

The other woman gave a soft snicker and glanced down at a folder, as if about to ask another question, but Eden was over these weird games.

“Look, can we cut to the chase? Why am I here? What’s the job, please? And, most especially, what’s your name?”

“Ms. Lawless, I’m sure you have many questions,” she began, her voice a mesmerizing, low, almost derisive tone.

“Of *course* I have many questions.” Was she kidding?

“And I’m afraid I won’t be able to answer most of them. Our clients pay top dollar for secrecy. Our entire consultancy firm runs on the premise their identities will be protected. That is our number-one priority: keeping secrets. So, I cannot tell you who hired us for this project or why.”

“But...”

“No.” One cold, firm word stopped Eden’s protest dead. “What I can tell you is this: a person who ruined your life once in your hometown is about to have a *very* bad time of her reelection campaign for mayor. Is that something you’re interested in hearing more about?”

Francine Wilson having a bad time for once in her life? “Yeah,” Eden said hoarsely. “Big yeah.”

“All right.” The woman slid some papers across the desk. “Our standard nondisclosure agreement. It says you can’t talk about me, our organization, the job you’re doing for us, or anything else associated with us.”

“Well, I don’t *know* anything, so it’ll be hard to blab.”

“Now, maybe. You will acquire more information as time goes on. The price to hear what we have in mind is your signature.” She pushed a pen across the desk. “Well, two of them. The forms are in duplicate.”

Eden picked up the paperwork, reading carefully. It seemed pretty straightforward. Don’t spill the beans and her sorry ass wouldn’t be sued into the Stone Age. “If I sign this, will you tell me your name?”

“Since my name will be right beneath yours as witness, that’s a given.”

“Good. Because it’d be weird having a boss without a name.” She signed her blocky solid scribble, then pushed the page back. “Otherwise, what would I call you? M?”

“M?” The woman’s expression turned puzzled. “Because our building is on M Street?”

“No, as in James Bond? His boss?”

The CEO reviewed Eden’s signatures, then signed her own name twice with acutely slanted, mashed letters that Eden couldn’t read upside down. Then she lifted an eyebrow. “You feel you are James Bond?”

“Um. No.”

The CEO shot her a withering look that made her feel a foot tall as she pushed one document over to Eden. “Your copy. I encourage you to study it in detail.”

Eden immediately tried to decipher the woman’s squishy signature and turn it into a name.

“My name is Michelle Hastings.” She paused, and her mouth made the tiniest uptick at the sides. “To save you the eye strain.”

Eden immediately looked up from the scrawl in relief. “Okay. Great. Hi!” she said a little too brightly.

“Hi,” Michelle drawled back.

Eden plowed on to hide how ridiculous she felt. “Well, I like Michelle better than M. Although Judi Dench’s M was *the* best. And I guess it’s not *bad* to be compared to Dame Judi.”

Michelle stared at her as if Eden had lost her damned mind.

Well, okay, she *might* be overcompensating for her nervousness by babbling. “Right. So, Michelle—”

The other woman twitched.

What? She was supposed to call her *Ms. Hastings*? She wasn’t Eden’s boss. Not yet, anyway. She didn’t know her. Certainly not enough to confer some sort of floor-scraping deference. Respect was earned.

“*Michelle*,” Eden repeated, kind of enjoying the way the other woman seemed to be biting back a reprimand—probably hard for her, not controlling everything. “Francine Wilson is the most corrupt person my hometown’s ever seen.”

“Do tell.”

Eden gave a frustrated huff. “When I locked horns with her, I was a twenty-year-old college kid and she was a big-deal property developer. She owns most of the real estate in Wingapo County, all the off-

campus student accommodation for my local college there and most of it around Hood College in neighboring Frederick.”

“Yes,” Michelle said briskly. “And Francine Wilson has acquired vastly more property since you tangled with her. She’s also grown more powerful since becoming mayor. Apparently, she counts the Maryland Attorney General as her closest friend.”

Eden scowled. “Closest bribe recipient, you mean.”

“And you know this for a fact?”

“I know *her*. Look, Francine’s not some successful businesswoman who just happens to be a property developer. My beef with her is not about jealousy or hating the rich or her ambition to own half the world. Francine’s a dirty slumlord. And *that* is a fact.”

“Mm.” Michelle watched her through hooded eyes.

“Don’t believe me?” Eden clenched her fists as the injustices of long ago rose up into her throat. “She gets away with murder. She’s untouchable! Anyone who says anything negative about her is portrayed as a bitter nutjob by the media and cops. She has them in her back pocket. She cuts corners on maintenance on her properties, but when tenants, like, oh I dunno, poor college kids, complain to the attorney general, Wingapo Police, or the media, it gets buried. Everyone in any position of power is either intimidated or compromised. If that’s not bad enough, now she’s the mayor! I’m glad I wasn’t there to see that. She has so much power, it’s disgusting.”

“Well,” Michelle said evenly. “I happen to agree.”

“You do?” Surprise stole through Eden. She unlocked her fists and surreptitiously wiped her sweaty palms down her pants. Usually no one believed her. It sounded so outlandish, as though Eden was some crazy conspiracy theorist.

“Of course.” Michelle drew a page out of her folder and read. “My researcher has concluded Francine Wilson is ‘corrupt, cocky, loaded with cash, and about to run for her third mayoral term even though it is thoroughly undeserved.’ And she *will* win. So...” She cocked her head. “Want to help us prevent that?”

Eden blinked. Her mouth went dry. “Why now? And why me?”

“I have no idea why a client reached out to us now, not two terms ago, to prevent Wilson’s win. But your second question is simple:

Mr. Clemmons spent months in Wingapo assessing what was needed to accomplish the client's request. He came to the same conclusion you did: the media and police have been paid off; the attorney general too."

"No kidding." Eden hunched over at the painful reminder. "She hurts anyone who gets in her way." She inhaled sharply. "I got in her way."

"Yes, you did. Memorably so. In fact, according to Mr. Clemmons, you remain the only person to stand up to her in any meaningful way. You got under her skin in a way no one has before or since. So that makes you the ideal candidate to do it again."

"But I LOST!" Eden cried out before mortification flooded her. "Hell! Sorry."

"Yes, you lost." Michelle said calmly, as if Eden hadn't lost her composure. "She had your father fired to get back at you. Additionally, she managed to get you expelled and run out of town. That's power."

"Yeah," Eden said sullenly.

Michelle's eyes left her notes and met Eden's. "She was a mere property developer at the time. She's on your old college's board and had a wing named after her at your father's now former workplace thanks to all her donations. That tells me she has no qualms about using her power and influence to punish her enemies."

Eden ground her teeth.

"Well, enemy, singular," Michelle corrected. "Since you appear to be her only one—officially, anyway." She pulled another page out of her folder. "Our researcher says you were expelled from Wingapo State University for making threats against a public figure. Namely, Francine Wilson."

Eden sighed.

Michelle cocked her head. "No argument then?"

"What's the point? She claims it's true, got the media to print it, the college to act on it. What's the real story—my side—got to do with anything?"

"As it turns out, we trade on the truth here. And secrets. And lies. We especially love the *real story*." Michelle flipped through her folder and drew out a photocopy of a news article. "Very creative," she noted. "It's impressive you managed to finally get a negative story into your local paper about the mayor."

Eden stared mulishly at the photograph of her infamous anti-Francine protest. The whole facade of the Wilson Properties building, all three stories of Francine's precious headquarters, was covered in computer paper to create an optical illusion.

A dozen of Eden's college friends, as fed up as she'd been with the substandard accommodation, had helped her stick up the paper for hours in the middle of the night. They'd swayed from abseiling ropes, affixing fifteen long reams of computer paper side by side to the windows.

From a distance, it showed the image of Francine Wilson's head, smiling benevolently like a giant Communist propaganda banner. But up close, passersby discovered the photo was made up of typed words...thousands and thousands of anonymous complaints from Wilson Properties tenants about unfixed issues. Low water pressure. Cracks in walls. Mold growth. No heat. Roach infestations.

Eden's eyes slid to the headline: *Vandals target property company office; make threats*

"Sure, I got a negative story into print...but it was negative about *me*," Eden said with a growl. Because when the local paper had printed its story, there hadn't been a single word about the tenants' complaints in the entire article. Just a rant about how Eden and her "juvenile delinquent accomplices" had misused college resources and threatened to harm Francine and her employees.

Okay, the misusing college resources part had been true. It was also how police had worked out it was her. She'd used the college computer lab to print her protest materials. And amidst all the printed complaints had been a few goading comments. Lines that Francine had twisted and called threats and demanded the university act on.

We won't let you get away with this!

You should be punished for treating tenants like scum!

This isn't over. We've only just begun!

YOU should pay this time! You and ALL your nasty-assed staff who ignore us!

It was the last comment that did it. Threatening more than five people with violence in Maryland turned out to be a felony. The frustrating part was that Eden hadn't even written those comments, but that didn't matter to her college. She'd been the ringleader; the protest materials were her responsibility. And Francine had threatened the college with all manner of serious police charges, bad publicity, donation-pulling, and general wrath until Eden was expelled.

"Wilson is a powerful, vindictive woman with no obvious chinks in her armor," Michelle concluded, dropping the article back into her folder.

"No kidding," Eden said under her breath.

"Except one." Michelle looked at her. And kept looking.

"Me?" Eden had surely misheard. If she was a chink in Francine Wilson's armor, it had to be the smallest chink in history.

"My researcher is adamant. In all the years Wilson has been throwing her weight around Wingapo County, you're the only person to have unsettled her. You even enraged her to the point that she showed her anger in public. She dropped her facade long enough for the people to glimpse who she really was. You're the reason she didn't get elected the first year she ran. Of course, she later made massive PR strides and the early incidents were forgotten. But in that brief window that you two were at war, you, Ms. Lawless, remain the only person to have ever seriously rattled Francine Wilson. So, naturally, we want you for this assignment."

"But she still won," Eden said quietly. "She always wins."

"You rattle her, Ms. Lawless," Michelle repeated. "You drive her crazy and throw her off her game. When you can make someone angry, they make mistakes, and *that's* what I'm counting on. Remember that you last encountered her when you were a student of limited means and connections. This time, you'll have us behind you, highly connected experts, as well as access to money and clout."

"So send one of your highly connected experts!"

"I can't send just anyone. *You're* the one who has her number. You're the one who distracts her. You *know* her. You are uniquely qualified for this assignment. Not to mention, you have a creative mind. You are *ideal*."

Well, she made a good argument. But still. Facing Francine again? Her gut churned in dismay. “She’s...a lot. Going home is a big deal for me. I couldn’t finish my IT degree because of her. My dad still doesn’t talk to me. Everyone I grew up with thinks I threatened Francine and her staff! Gah! She’s the devil!” Eden sagged. “And honestly? I’m afraid she’s unstoppable.”

“She *lost* that first election,” Michelle reminded her, eyes sharp. “Because of *you*. You ensured everyone saw the real woman. Even if they forgot later, for one moment in time *you* won, and that’s why she retaliated savagely. Ms. Lawless, you already destroyed her once; I simply want you to do it again.”

“How?” Eden croaked out. “I mean, specifically? What can I do?”

“You know the players. They’re all still there. You know what *not* to do and who to avoid. I’ll need all your creativity to get around the blackouts on any negative media reporting of her. So: Find a way to make the public remember what she’s like and do it in such a way that even the media will have to cover it. Can you do that?”

“I...maybe?” Eden said slowly. “But just because I can doesn’t mean I should.”

“You said it yourself: She’s the devil. Shouldn’t devils be defeated?” Michelle’s tone was taunting.

“Devils burn you, Michelle. Everyone and everything she touches—if she doesn’t like you, you’re crispy. Look, I’ve moved on. I don’t see what I’d get from this aside from revenge, which, sure, might be a blast for five seconds, but it’s not really me. In fact, there’s nothing in this for me but pain. Wingapo has some depressing memories for me. Why would I do this to myself again?”

Michelle smiled slightly. “To *win*. And besides, you will get a very generous payment if Wilson loses the election. That should keep your little...protest endeavors in funding for years. So why not have Wilson fund your future as the ultimate ‘screw you’ to her?” She slid a packet across the table. “The remuneration details are all in there.”

Eden reached for it.

“But the CliffsNotes are that it includes a contract stating that your pay is two hundred thousand if Wilson loses her election. Plus fifty thousand for expenses on a debit card supplied to you. The con-

tract further stipulates that everything you do must be done legally and nothing can ever be linked to us. It must appear that you decided to do this yourself out of the blue.”

Eden swallowed in shock. Two *hundred* thousand... “Holy...” she whispered. “That is *not* chump change.”

A smirk darted across Michelle’s face. “What did you expect from us?”

“I’m not sure,” Eden said honestly. “I don’t know who ‘us’ is. I mean, I was half convinced this was a sex-slave kidnapping scam thing.”

This time, Michelle’s perfect mask dropped, replaced with astonishment. “A...what?”

“Well, only *half* convinced. I was also open to this being some classy, upscale con. Though I’m not sure I have much of anything you could scam from me. Maybe Gloria. That’s my van. She’s named after Gloria Steinem and she used to be a FedEx van but I’ve tricked her up now,” Eden rambled on, feeling a little dazed. She paused for a breath. “I’m *still* open to considering that this could be a con. Just so you know.”

Michelle’s look turned startled. “Well,” she said slowly, as if not sure quite how to take this turn of events. “We have no interest in acquiring your...Gloria.” Her eyes tightened. “I can assure you we’re more in the business of political climate change than wallowing about in filth such as sexual slavery.”

“An argument could be made they’re the same. Politics and filth.” Eden shrugged.

That seemed to stymie Michelle.

“Look, I’m interested, I am,” Eden said, before this snowballed into anything weirder. “Can I think about it? Take a day or two? This is a lot to take in, you know? I’m just a liberal-leftie protest organizer who loves a good cause. You’re asking me to go back to where my life fell apart and poke at those old wounds again.” Eden gave a slow headshake. “My brain is overwhelmed. I don’t think I can force any decisions right now. Can I take some time?”

“You have twenty-four hours, and then I need your answer. If you wish to proceed, reply to the secured email we will send you with a Yes, and that will be considered agreement to our contract here.” She

tapped the envelope. “We will get you to digitally sign off on it properly within days. My PA, Tilly—Ottillie Zimmermann—will liaise with you if we need anything further. Her number is in the envelope too.”

“Sure. Okay.” Eden nodded. “Twenty-four hours. Right.” She reached for the envelope in front of her.

“Wait.” Michelle put her hand out for it and Eden slid it back.

Michelle’s fountain pen had a glossy tortoiseshell grip. She scribbled on the envelope. “I’m going to assume, once you’ve dealt with your *overwhelmed brain*, that you will take this offer. If so, you will be expected to Skype in your progress reports each evening. These are the Skype details for that video call. Eight sharp each night that you’re in Wingapo. Do not be late.”

“Skype? Nightly?” Eden blinked. “You don’t trust me?”

“It’s *standard operating procedure*.” Michelle’s eyes tightened. “It’s surely not too much to ask given how much you’ll be paid? I like to be sure we’ve invested wisely. Do not ask for special treatment.”

“Uh. Okay. No problem.” Eden nodded. The CEO wasn’t wrong. This *was* a lot of money. So it’d make sense a handler had been assigned to find out what she was up to on the ground.

“Good,” Michelle said. “Any further questions?”

Eden shook her head mutely.

“Tilly will show you out.” She pressed a buzzer, and her assistant reappeared at the door. “Ms. Lawless is leaving now,” Michelle told her.

Eden scrambled to her feet.

“Oh, and Ms. Lawless,” Michelle added sharply, “you will address me as Ms. Hastings going forward in any interactions or correspondence.”

Eden paused and said quietly, “I’m sorry, I won’t be doing that.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t take it personally, but I find the demand to use honorifics classist. We’re all humans, right? All spinning on this big ol’ marble, just trying to survive, put our pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Historically, they slapped pretentious labels on those with money or power to keep the little guy in their place. To push them down. They

call it respect, but they never return it. I'm not about that. Equality, Michelle. I'm only ever about equality."

Michelle's lips pressed together.

"Only exception," Eden continued, "is if it's someone changing the whole world in some amazing way. Then they'd have earned it. Like, if you were curing cancer on the side." She paused. "Wait, since I don't know what else you do around here, I can't assume anything. You aren't, are you? Curing cancer?"

Michelle snorted. "Not that I'm aware of."

Eden grinned. "Okay, then. Well, I'll go and let you return to... whatever the heck it is all you secret squirrels do around here."

"Secret. Squirrels?" Michelle's expression was incredulous.

With a shrug, Eden said, "Well, without a name, that's what I'm calling you people in my head."

"Not just in your head, it seems," Michelle muttered.

"I guess not." Eden grinned. "Oops."

"If it helps, outside our office, many of our contractors call it 'The Club' to avoid questions."

"The...*club*." Eden peered around. "Seriously? *Is* there a club around here? Like a floor down or something? Blackjack? Lounge? Sultry singers, maybe?"

"No." Michelle bit off the word and glanced at her watch.

Eden took the hint and headed to the door. "Okay, right. I'll get back to you ASAP. Bye, Michelle."

She didn't have to look back to know the other woman had reacted at being called that.

Eden's phone was firmly pushed back into her hand by the snooty, art-loving receptionist. She glanced back at the bronze sculpture—*still freaking nude*. Then she was being inserted into the elevator by the ever-efficient Tilly.

Outside once more, Eden stared back up at the building's towering facade, feeling like she'd just been hit by something powerful, strange, and overwhelming. Hard to like or dislike yet, too soon to say, but really mysterious. A bit like Michelle Hastings. Although she was unforgettable in another way too.

Not that Eden was going to focus on something so shallow as looks. She had to weigh up the offer dispassionately and not for a moment think of those beautiful, sardonic lips, that intense expression, or the powerful presence that filled her whole office.

She unlocked her van and tossed “The Club’s” envelope on her passenger seat.

Instead of starting her engine, she glanced back up to the top floor of the building. She couldn’t see anything, of course, but she had the strangest sensation she was being watched.

* * *

“*Standard operating procedure.*”

“You heard that?” Michelle looked up as her assistant returned after showing Lawless out.

Tilly merely looked back at her.

“Of course you did,” Michelle added dryly.

What was the point of using white noise if private conversations could be overheard?

Through *closed* doors.

Oh. Tilly had to have listened in through her desk phone. She pursed her lips. “I’d suggest eavesdropping is inappropriate, but it *is* a central tenet of our business model.”

Tilly smiled her agreement. Her usually stern face softened, transforming itself in a way that always impressed Michelle. No wonder she’d been an effective field agent back in the day.

“On this particular candidate, I was too curious not to find out how the meeting was going,” Tilly said. “So...are we going to talk about our new standard operating procedure?”

“Yes, well, she’s new.” Michelle hated the tinge of defensiveness in her voice. “How do I know if she’ll be any good?”

“You never asked to Skype any of the other new hires on their first assignments.”

“They aren’t rampaging, idealistic social justice warriors with the potential to go off piste.”

“You worry that Ms. Lawless is a loose cannon?” Tilly asked.

This time, Michelle did lift her gaze. “I’m not sure *what* she is.” Well, not exactly. “But she bears watching.”

Her assistant snorted. “She is different, isn’t she? That nonsense about rebranding ourselves as makers of Humboldt cheese?”

“That was the exact moment I wondered if Clemmons was playing a joke on me. He sent us a panda,” Michelle said with a wry smile. “You know—all innocent, cute, and hapless, means well, but without a single conniving bone in her body.”

“You think she’s cute?” Tilly asked neutrally.

Michelle wasn’t fooled by the innocent question. Her PA was wily and observant and could fish like a pro. “Only if you like pandas—especially guileless ones. There’s a reason they’re endangered.” She frowned. “Do you think Clemmons lost his mind recommending her? All I see is someone raw and naïve and hopelessly out of her depth here. She’s clever enough in the shallow end, I’ll grant you, but we’re bottomless.”

“Well, I’d guarantee we don’t have any other contractors on our books like her.”

“Given that our contractors are all sharks and snakes, no, it’s safe to say we have no pandas. Her face when I told her the pay?” Michelle said with faint amusement. “I thought you’d have to administer her CPR.”

“Me?” Tilly’s eyebrow lifted slightly. “Not you?”

Again with the fishing. But only fools laid bare their necks, especially around here, even to generally harmless sixty-four-year-old assistants named Otilie Zimmermann.

“No, thank you,” Michelle said lightly. “I might catch that Girl Scout idealism of hers. Next thing, I’d be saving endangered species in my downtime.”

“No chance of that.” Tilly bit off a half-laugh. “I can’t help but notice she passed your little sculpture test.”

“Yes. That was interesting, wasn’t it?”

The sculpture question was a personality test Michelle gave all potential hires. It was irrelevant whether Lawless said the figure was nude or not. Michelle would argue either side depending on a candidate’s answer. The idea was to test whether Lawless would change her

answer to match Michelle's. Whether she would ingratiate herself to a potential boss by changing her opinion on a frivolous matter that she had no investment in.

The staff who worked here knew diplomacy. Most had slid high up government or security agencies before joining The Fixers. They knew the value of manipulation and of having bosses like you. No one had ever dug their heels in and stuck to their original answer on the test, knowing it could cost them a potential job.

Except Lawless.

Michelle regarded her assistant thoughtfully. Tilly had been with The Fixers from the beginning and had held her CEO assistant job long before Michelle had arrived. "Tell me honestly, Tilly: how would you have answered if I'd given you that test in your interview?"

Tilly supplied one of her completely disarming smiles that made her look like a kindly grandmother. She affected a sweet, down-home voice and answered, "Why, Ms. Hastings, I'm sure you know more about art than I do. I've never seen *anything* like that before where I come from. Are you an art expert then? Is that an interest of yours?"

Michelle laughed at the insincerity and clever pivot. "Remind me never to cross you."

"Wise." Tilly looked pleased. "So...*is* Lawless the only one to stick to her guns on the test?"

"The only one to do it directly. O'Brian came close." She adjusted her voice to the man's accent—New York City with a solid dollop of Irish he'd never lost despite twenty-five years in the US. "He said: 'Shame I got the answer wrong, but it's feckin' *art*. I do guns, knives, lockpickin', tracin', stakeouts, and all that. So: when do I start my *actual* job?'"

"That sounds like him. Interesting that you promoted him straight to head of security. Was his answer a factor?"

"It was." Michelle admitted. "I prefer honest people who aren't afraid of speaking their mind even if it's uncomfortable, especially given the truth is a rare commodity around here." Being honest was an absurd concept in DC. "I know our entire company depends on us skulking around, being slippery and clever, so it's refreshing knowing where I stand. Of course I chose him."

Tilly studied her for a moment. “Well, then, I imagine you’ll enjoy Ms. Lawless a great deal. She is nothing if not frank. Even when she’s not speaking, she can be read like an open book.”

Enjoy Ms. Lawless? Hardly. The candidate struck Michelle as a somewhat strange individual who’d dressed as if she were heading to a rave in those chunky boots, trucker jacket, and pants that were barely disguised jeans. She *was* forthright, interesting, and unpolished, and she held the rare distinction of being the only one to pass Michelle’s honesty test. But she was also decidedly odd, like the squarest of pegs. So, no, there would be no enjoying Lawless. She glared at Tilly for even making the suggestion.

Unperturbed, her PA wandered over to the sweeping rear office windows and then stopped, looking down. She spoke into the glass: “Ms. Hastings, have you seen what she drives?”

“You mean the infamous Gloria?”

“Your eyeballs may never recover. It’s a hippie’s dream ride, complete with solar panels.”

Solar panels? Did she live in that thing, then? Michelle shuddered at the idea. “I’ll leave it to my imagination and presume it’s the most appalling-looking revamped FedEx van in human existence.”

Tilly turned from the window, her eyebrow cocked. “Isn’t it ridiculous that that naïve, sweet summer child has somehow managed to make an arch enemy?” Incredulity laced her tone.

“That may speak more about Wilson than Lawless. I admit I’m rather curious as to what that ‘naïve, sweet summer child’ will come up with to get a powerful mayor on the outs with the public.”

“You’re assuming Lawless will take the job.”

“She will. Even professional crusaders need funding. Think how many doomed critters she can save from extinction,” Michelle drawled. “We might actually be putting money into a worthy pocket for once.”

“That’ll be a first.” Tilly’s tone was dry.

Wasn’t that the truth? For the briefest second, Michelle’s heart gave a bitter clench at the reminder. The Fixers was the antithesis of everything Eden Lawless stood for. For the right price, they either made the weak powerful or crushed the enemies of the powerful. They mainly fulfilled the whims and dreams of people who didn’t deserve it.

Rare was the day they helped bleeding-heart causes. Even then, it was usually an unintended side effect from some larger, dirtier deed.

And because they were mere consultants—making suggestions, calling in favors from their extensive network, scratching mutual backs, being helpful to a point, it was all entirely legal. Mostly. As long as you didn't count all the bribes and computer hacks.

The Fixers didn't exist on paper anywhere. A Washington DC accountancy firm paid all their expenses, wages, equipment, and building rent under a file they called The Club. The Fixers' Hong Kong-based headquarters, in turn, paid the accountancy firm. The five Americans behind the offshore headquarters made up The Fixers' board. It was one perfect, neat circle.

All parties were scrupulous to ensure there were no tax or filing irregularities that could cause any officials to sniff around. For decades, that had kept The Fixers invisible and safe: two things Michelle prized a great deal as CEO. It was the reason for their ongoing success.

"Lawless is trying to take on the system," Tilly mused.

"Yes," Michelle said quietly. "She'll never win."

"No. That's not how the world works. But am I wrong or does Lawless actually seem to think *we're* doing the greater good? Her cancer question, for instance? She has no idea who she's throwing her lot in with."

"No," Michelle said, wondering why she'd clenched her jaw. "She doesn't have a clue."

"Would she even have stepped foot in our building if she knew who we are?"

"No chance at all." Michelle gave Tilly a serious look. "It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway: it's best for everyone involved that Lawless never finds out what we do here. Specifically, how... open...we can be to dealing with grayer areas of morality. Don't you agree?"

Tilly inclined her head in acceptance.

Good. Message received.

Chapter 2

Celebration Nachos

THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING A minor revolutionary was the fact Eden spent most of her life living out of her van. Gloria smelled of dirt collected from across America no matter how often she cleaned her. Not that she didn't adore her baby, which she'd tricked out to be almost fancy. Still, living and working in the same twenty-foot-long space 24/7 could get stale.

The upside of being a minor revolutionary, though, was she had multiple home bases, thanks to a friendship network that spread from coast to coast. And no greater friend existed in the world than Aggie Teo, owner of a warm heart and a one-bedroom slice of adorableness in Marshall Heights, DC. Eden had decided the moment she'd left her interview this morning that what she needed was some chill and processing time with her best friend.

Aggie—short for Agatha, thanks to her crime-novel loving mom—had been Eden's college roommate in Wingapo and these days could be counted on for a pull-out sofa bed, mockery for Eden's "super-lez" outfits, and enthusiastic commentary on the state of her dating life. Eden's dating life, of course; never Aggie's.

Aggie didn't need any commentary on her own love life because she'd been mooning over the same man for fifteen years. The *not*-couple were still navigating how or whether to go from friends to more. Apparently, that was not something to rush.

The moment Eden pulled up in front of Aggie's townhouse, a skinny, two-story, sky-blue building, a sense of peace and warmth settled over her. It was shattered in two seconds when her phone rang.

She answered: "Eden."

"Oh, thank God you're there."

"Helen?" She frowned and checked her phone for the time. Eden was helping this client gain public support for nurses facing a staff shortage and pay crisis in Ohio. At this very minute, Helen was supposed to be mid-protest, at the center of a media photo op. "What's wrong?"

"The governor didn't turn up." There was a panicked wheeze down the line. "And when he didn't show, the media packed up and left." She huffed. "I practiced my sound bites, just like you said too. No more than ten seconds."

Damn. Eden rubbed her temple. No media, no coverage. No awareness of their cause. She'd thought the governor wanted to look sympathetic to a bunch of nurses, with his election coming up. On the other hand, he had been seen dining with the biggest hospital's administrator two days ago. Someone had changed his mind.

"So we've taken to the streets," Helen said uncertainly. "We couldn't think what else to do to get the media to notice us. We're blocking traffic now, waving our signs. I think when the traffic starts backing up, we'll make the news anyway."

Goddammit. *Amateurs*. "No," Eden said instantly. "Get everyone off the road immediately. I mean it. Not one person should have a toe in front of a vehicle."

"What? Why?"

"Are you *trying* to turn public sentiment against you? Instead of people wanting better conditions for you, all you're doing is creating a bunch of angry drivers who'll be late to meetings, jobs, appointments, whatever and who'll never support you after this."

"But it's a common tactic!" Helen sputtered. "Everyone does it."

"Organized, well-advertised street marches are one thing, sure. Bedlam like this is not a sound tactic. You've paid for my expert guidance, so listen when I give it: Get your people off the street before you

make headlines for being hauled off to jail. While you're doing that, put Melissa on."

"Ah, okay." A rustling noise sounded.

While her client found her second-in-charge, the woman who ran their nursing union's social media, Eden quickly jumped to Google and tapped in a query, studying the results.

"Hi?"

"Melissa, it's Eden. I need you to get everyone some new protest signs or write over what they have with: *honk if you support nurses. Honk harder if you love Steve Carrell.*"

"What?" She paused. "Why some random actor?"

"His mother was a psychiatric nurse. Do the same for Tina Turner—she worked as a nurse's aide. Repeat for Jenny McCarthy, Julie Walters, Paul Brandt, and anyone else you can find with a link to nursing. You get the idea. Now here's the important bit. Wave the signs—from the *side* of the road. Do *not* get in the way of traffic—and get lots of photos and videos of the nurses doing it."

"Okay," Melissa said. "Can do."

"Upload the photos to social media and tag the relevant star named in that sign. You only need one star to retweet the protest pic, but the more who do, the better for us. When one celebrity retweets it, post that tweet to the governor, the hospital execs, and anyone else in power. Ask them why they don't think helping Ohioan nurses is worth their time. Ask the Governor especially why he snubbed nurses today. Get *everyone* to retweet that to him. Drown him in tweets."

"I don't think the governor will care. He only reluctantly agreed to attend our meeting and pulled the plug at the first opportunity. Besides, it's only social media. He doesn't even run his account."

Eden snorted. "He might care when the media pick up the story after a celebrity makes journalists give a crap about nurses' issues. On that note, I'll email you a list of sympathetic reporters to alert to the celebrity tweets when they start coming in. They'll follow up, don't worry. Nothing like combining sympathy for nurses, apathy from a politician, and the concerns of a popular celebrity to get the media excited."

"How do you know all this?" Melissa asked, sounding a little dazed.

“It’s my job.” Eden fished her battered media contacts book out of her glove box and scanned it for Ohioans. “Try Jennifer Richards first at WJW-TV. Both her kids work in healthcare, if I remember correctly. Send her a video she can air of people honking at the signs, especially footage related to whichever celebrity has retweeted.”

“What makes you so sure one will?”

“Most celebrities remember where they come from, especially ones from a working-class background. They’d feel like they’re turning their backs on their roots not to share this. Okay?”

“Right. Helen’s back.” More rustling sounded.

“Hi.” Helen sounded breathless. “I got everyone off the street. Now what?”

“Talk to Melissa. Let me know how it goes. Just stick to the game plan and you should get the media exposure you want.”

“Thanks, Eden. You’re a legend.”

Eden snorted. “I do my best. You stay safe. Don’t let the governor, the hospital execs, or the police take over your story. Remember, *you* control the narrative.”

“Yes, right.”

“Good. Gotta go. Bye!”

She pocketed her phone just as Aggie’s door flew open with a thud.

A tiny human blur topped with shaggy white-blond hair launched itself from the top step with a shriek of delight and grew larger until it filled Eden’s side window. Aggie was always a bundle of excitement.

Her small but solid body was squeezed into dog pajamas. That was her standard “office” wear, given she worked from home as a supervisor for a help line for teens.

“Edie!” Aggie knocked on her window before Eden could roll it down. “Don’t you make me wait, now!”

Eden slid down the window and grinned. “Woman, you know your neighbors don’t need a street-wide announcement every time I’m in town.”

“They’ll live,” Aggie declared, her expression unrepentant. “Everyone around here knows I hang with the strangest people.” Her arm made a great looping motion toward herself. “Come in, come in. I need your gossip like air. Life’s way too dull since you abandoned me.”

Eden snorted but hauled ass outside, slamming the door behind her. “You make it sound like we’re tragic exes, when I know you only have eyes for Colin. Is it okay if I crash here tonight? And, well, today?”

Aggie huffed. “No Colin talk. You make me sound boring and indecisive. Which I am. Of course you can crash. I keep that sofa bed just for you, you know. It’s got divots in exactly your shape.” She led Eden up to her house.

As soon as they were inside, Aggie flung her arms around Eden with abandon and squeezed like an anaconda—if anacondas were uncary little rib-crackers who wore dog pajamas in the middle of the day.

“I like your new color.” Eden nodded at Aggie’s hair as she finally extracted herself from the hug. “You were a redhead last time.”

“That was three whole months ago,” Aggie protested. “Don’t you ever look at my Insta? I’ve been working out if I’m having more fun as a blond. I’ll report back my findings.”

“Which does Colin prefer?” Eden asked slyly.

“No, no, we’re not doing this again. You know the rules: I have no *official* love life but live vicariously through yours while we sort our shit out.”

“Uh huh. And you know I haven’t dated anyone since that intense no-nukes girl. Pretty sure she only wanted me for a green card.” Eden made her ass at home on Aggie’s couch and then inspected the palm tree prints on the new cushions. Well, not *new*, new. “Oh hey, the eighties called; they want your cushions back.”

“I got them for free.” Aggie’s eyes lit up. “Don’t you love them? Someone dumped them on the curb. Can you believe that?”

“All too easily.” Eden gave one a ginger poke. No plume of dust emerged.

“Want a drink?”

“Goddess, yes. I’ve had a wild, weird-ass morning.”

“I’ll get your usual.” Aggie shot over to the fridge, pulled out a light-beer bottle, called “head’s up,” and tossed it to her.

Eden snatched it out of the air with ease. Fast reflexes came with her job—you never knew who was going to almost clobber you with a wayward sign.

Aggie joined her on the couch, holding her one true love, Bacchus-F, the energy drink her cousins in South Korea had hooked her on.

“How are your folks?” Eden asked. “Still scandalized by the fact you associate with me—or worse, that you sneak in an occasional protest?”

A few years back, Aggie had left her social worker job and hit the protest circuit with Eden. The absolute highlight had been their rescuing Kevin—a one-eyed, tan-and-white guinea pig—from a cosmetics testing lab. The old boy (Kev had to be six by now) lived the high life in a huge enclosure that ran all around, up, down, and through Aggie’s house.

She always claimed that the best part of protesting with Eden had been meeting Kevin, but the truth was Aggie loved fighting for a cause. She’d only quit the protest circuit when her parents finally wore her down.

The Teos were mild-mannered and adorable but tended to get a collective round of indigestion whenever their only daughter broke the rules. *Any* rules. Especially ones in their adopted country of America. But Eden still loved Aggie’s whole huge, enthusiastic clan to bits and pieces—and it was mutual.

“My folks are same as ever,” Aggie said with a long-suffering sigh. “Worried about me, my career, my scandalously single status at my age.”

“Same old, same old, then.” Eden cracked the beer and took a deep sip. “Oh *yes*. I needed this to numb the weird of today.”

Aggie twisted sideways to take her in. “You know it’s only eleven, right? And that sounded way too heartfelt. Fill me in. What’s the weirdness? Not the nurses’ protest, right?”

Eden shook her head and peered at her beer.

“So, the weird is what?”

“I’ve signed an NDA, so I can’t say much. But I have a job offer that would see me going back home for a bit. It’d stir up the old shit again. Not sure I’m up for it.”

“The old shit?” Aggie’s eyes slowly widened. “Francine? That massively vindictive cow?”

"I'd like it on the record that I named no names." Eden gave her a coy look.

"Right, sure. We're absolutely not talking about anyone we know."

"Anyway, I don't know if I'm up for poking over old bones again. You know how much that messed with my head."

"Yeah, girl. I do. I really do." Aggie gave her a long look.

Eden stared back morosely. "She made my life hell. And turned Dad against me. He's still giving me radio silence."

Aggie's expression radiated concern. "Why would you ever want to go back? Wingapo's so small—what, forty thousand people? Odds are high you'd bump into him somewhere."

Eden chewed her bottom lip. "Maybe I'll get lucky, though."

"Maybe." Aggie's frowned deepened. "Can we circle back to the why? It'd have to be good."

"A lot of money. And a job that might make a certain person squirm a lot."

"I know you don't care about the money." Aggie tilted her head. "So, *are* you planning on making Francine squirm?"

"I can't answer that. Legally, I mean. But hypothetically speaking, wouldn't it be nice if the woman who drummed me out of town got shown up for who she is? Well, I mean again? A better-executed job this time?"

"Better-executed..." Aggie drew in a breath. "You get that the cops and media are still hers? If you go after her, you'll still be painted as the bitter jerk attacking a decent businesswoman. I'm all for a bit of vengeance, but Francine is untouchable."

"Right." Wasn't that what she'd tried to explain to Michelle? Aggie knew. She'd been right beside her. Watched as Eden's ass got hauled over hot coals. She'd been the one to hold Eden as she cried when her father told her he was done with her. That she wasn't his kid.

"So why do this to yourself?" Aggie asked.

Good question.

"She's up for reelection, and she's even more powerful than she was." Eden tried to think positive. "But I'll be better resourced than before. I just need a good plan. Something subtle. That was my mistake last time."

“Mmm,” Aggie said. “Well, I suppose she can’t trash your reputation any worse. What’s she going to do? Turn your dad against you? Make people hate you? It’s already done.”

Now, that was an excellent point. Eden nodded. “True.”

“I just worry about how it’ll hurt you. You were so young when she shredded you last time. That stuff scars.”

It did. “But I’m not the idealistic kid I was,” Eden tried. “I’m smarter. Stronger, I hope.”

“Yes. We’re all different. It’s been what, fifteen, sixteen years? She’ll be different too. She’ll know even more vicious ways to fight back. You’ll have to be ready.”

“I will be.”

“Sounds like you’ve decided,” Aggie said and slapped Eden’s thigh. “Well, you know what this means.” She jumped up. “Celebration nachos.”

“That’s a new one.” Eden chuckled. “A variation, no doubt, on Comfort nachos, Hangover nachos, Monday nachos...”

“Hey, no badmouthing the nachos, or I’ll eat them all myself.” Aggie dumped a bag of corn chips onto a plate, added a gloopy half bottle of spicy bean sauce and followed it with an excessive amount of shredded cheese. She slid it into the microwave and mashed some buttons until it came on with a loud whirring noise.

“Does your mom know you do that to food?” Eden asked.

“She must never know,” Aggie said grimly. “I never could convince her that Western junk food has its merits when she can whip up her kimchi-jjigae in the same amount of time.”

That was a wild exaggeration, but Eden knew what she meant. “I miss your mom.” She stared at the noisy microwave with its obscene cargo. “And her cooking.”

Mrs. Teo’s signature spicy vegetable stew was to die for, Korean soul food at its finest. Unfortunately, Aggie had entirely failed to inherit the cooking gene.

“I’ll tell her,” Aggie said. “She’ll be sorry to miss you. I mean, unless you’re staying a few days this time?” Aggie’s look was hopeful.

“I can’t. If I take this new job, I’ll need to get to Wingapo ASAP.”

“Please tell me you’re not tangled up in some shit for the CIA,” Aggie said, side-eying her. “Remember, you’re Eden Lawless, Force for Good, not Occasional Regime Overthrower.”

The microwave dinged.

“The CIA works *outside* of America, and I know you know that,” Eden said with an eye roll. “And before you start, I’m not working for the FBI, either. Everything in the skyscraper of an office I interviewed at was bronze or chrome and cost a mint. And do not get me started on the multimillion-dollar view or fancy French sculpture. It’s private enterprise. And honestly, that’s all I know. The office had no name.”

“Are you sure you want to get in bed with them, knowing jack-all about them?” Aggie retrieved the gooey, nuke-blasted plate of possibly-food and placed it in front of Eden along with some paper napkins.

Eden took a cheesy corn chip and bit in. After chewing savagely and trying not to wince at its weird texture, she declared, “This isn’t the worst thing you’ve ever pulled out of your microwave.”

“High praise.” Aggie grinned. “Now, stop dodging the question.”

“Okay, sure, I have reservations. But, equally, my cause aligns with theirs on this project.”

“Francine really does deserve to go down,” Aggie agreed.

“I never said that’s what I’m doing,” Eden protested. “But as an abstract thought? Hell. Yeah.”

“It still bugs me how quickly everyone forgot all the stuff you brought to light,” Aggie said. “I did not imagine our rental having a crack wide enough to put my hand through. But within a few months of your protest, it all faded away into nothing.”

“I’m pretty sure the tenants haven’t forgotten.” Eden took another swig of beer. “The people who can’t do a damned thing about the condition of their properties and can’t afford to leave.”

Aggie reached for a gooey nacho chip. “Girl, if anyone can do this, it’s you.”

“That’s just what my new boss said.”

“But I know it’ll probably hurt. If you need me there, you say the word, and I’ll come. I’ll bring reinforcements too. Allies, beer, Victory nachos, whatever you need.” She shot Eden a genuine look of support before cramming the goopy chip into her mouth.

Gratitude filled her. “Thanks for the offer, but I think I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” Aggie’s steady gaze held hers as she chewed slowly. She was so rarely serious for this long; it was a little unnerving. “If you’re sure you know what you’re doing.”

Not a clue, Eden wanted to say. But it was decided. She pulled out her phone before she lost her nerve and emailed the address she’d been given, sending one word: *yes*.

Two minutes later, her phone pinged. Except it wasn’t a reply from her new company.

Tina Turner bit! Look!

That was from Melissa. Eden clicked a link to find the singer’s tweet, already liked by twelve thousand fans, with a photo of a nurse holding a sign asking motorists to *Honk if you like nurses or Tina Turner*. The tweet read:

Nurses are simply the best! I should know! I support the nurses protesting in Ohio!

Two other celebrities had also retweeted the protest, their messages also quoted and sent to the governor and media.

Excellent. This might just work out better than her original plans for the protest.

An email from Helen said the governor had already agreed to a new meeting, one he promised to attend this time. And two reporters had reached out, seeking more information on the nurses’ dispute. *Excellent work*, she emailed them both back.

All due to you, Helen wrote, including a bunch of star emojis.

Eden grinned. Happy clients made her happy too.

Her phone pinged again, but this time from an unknown number.

Welcome to The Fixers, Ms. Lawless

THE FIXER

The Fixers? That was their name? Interesting. And for some reason, Eden just knew it had been Michelle behind that message. Unbidden, even as her heart raced with anxiety for what lay ahead, she smiled.

Then, just for shits and giggles, she texted back on a whim.

Thanks. Btw she's definitely nude.

Chapter 3

Edgar Degas and the Meaning of Life

CHEEKY. MICHELLE PUT DOWN HER phone with a smirk, deciding that, if nothing else, Lawless might be marginally entertaining. As long as she didn't cross any lines or disrespect Michelle, she would allow it. She leaned back in her chair and gazed out at her view as she mentally ran through her task list. Something unsavory floated to the top of the pile.

Michelle punched the intercom button and said, "Tilly? Get me Cavaner's file. Time we squeezed the senator. Send that hacker to see me. What's his name?"

"Which one?"

"The one we hired from LA after the SmartPay job went south."

"Snakepit."

"Yes." She sighed at the name, but his talent was undeniable. They'd tried to hire the young man's IT partner in crime too, but he'd opted to stay in LA.

Five minutes later, a rumpled young man in a Nuka Cola T-shirt stood before her nervously. He ran his fingers through an attempt at three-day beard growth.

Tilly pointed him to the visitor's chair and exited.

"Mr...Snakepit." Michelle eyed him.

"Yes?" he said, his voice breaking, a blush sliding up his cheeks.

"I'm in need of your...special skills."

“Which ones? Uh...Miss, Ms...um, ma’am. Specifically?”

Michelle pushed Senator Cavaner’s file across the table. “This man has incurred the wrath of The Fixers. He needs to be reminded we’re not to be messed with.”

“Oh-kay?” He nodded hard and repeatedly, then reached for the folder, flicking it open, and scanned the bio file on the top.

“Today, cut off his heating,” Michelle said, ticking off her fingers. “Tomorrow, his power. Next day, his credit cards and those of his wife.”

“Um...ma’am, it’s uh, the middle of winter,” Snakepit stammered out. His eyes darted to the page in front of him. “He lives in an effin’ cold place, pardon my French. Snow and stuff. Cutting off his heat and power...” He faded out.

“I’m aware. The harsher the lesson, the faster it is learned.”

“Oh. Right.”

“So you can do it?”

“Yes.” Snakepit appeared to rally. “Want me to remotely disable his cell phone and his wife’s?”

“No.” Michelle leaned back in her chair and regarded him impassively.

“Okay,” Snakepit said, chewing on his lip. “Is that everything?”

“For now.”

“What’d he do, anyway?”

“Crossed us. That is unacceptable.”

“Right.” His head bobbed up and down.

“Email me a report of your progress each day, confirming you’ve enacted the task on your worklist.”

He scrambled to his feet, clutching the folder to his concave chest.

“Before you go...” She paused, wondering why she cared. “Your friend in LA, the one who said no to joining us here...”

“Duppy.”

Do they have to have such ridiculous names? “Yes. Why did he say no? I’d have thought shoving bundles of cash into the bank accounts of teen hackers would be a dream gig.”

His cheeks reddened.

“What is it?”

“Uh, I don’t think you want me to tell you ‘zactly what Duppy said.”

Michelle made an impatient *go on* gesture.

Snakepit scratched his ear and then looked down at his scuffed sneakers. “He said, ‘I won’t work for any piece of shit who screws over Catherine Ayers. She’s a fuckin’ legend.’”

Michelle’s breath stilled, and she went very, very cold at a name she was trying extremely hard not to be reminded of. She did not—could not—speak.

He shuffled a little, then rushed on, apparently misunderstanding the chill in her expression. “I wouldn’t take it personal, him sayin’ no. See, he had the hots for her. Not just coz she’s such a sick journalist. I mean *her*.”

“She’s sick?” Horror rose. How had her sources not told her—

“Uh, no,” he cut into her thoughts. “Like...*lit?* *Dope?*” His eyebrows scrunched together. “Uhhh. *Cool?*”

“Oh.”

“Even though she’s *wayyy* too old for him. Like, in her forties and everything.” He gave a chuckle as if the mere idea of finding Catherine Ayers attractive was ridiculous.

Stupid boy. Ayers was utterly breathtaking, inside and out. Only a complete fool would fail to see that or—far more inexcusably—know it, have her, and toss her away.

Michelle was obviously a complete fool. She set her jaw hard.

Snakepit fell silent when Michelle still hadn’t so much as twitched.

“You may go,” she said sharply. “Remember: daily updates.”

He bolted out like his pants were on fire.

Michelle’s emotions darkened and swirled. Not again. She despised the waves of guilt and regret she’d had to contend with ever since she’d lost Catherine Ayers nine years ago.

No, not lost, for pity’s sake. *Broken*. Michelle had broken Ayers. For a job.

That little drip of a kid...Duppy...turned out to have far more integrity than Michelle. He’d been smart enough to know when to say no.

The familiar stir of self-loathing rose, and she forced it back down. Well, she'd just *had* to ask. She always had to tug the loose threads and satisfy her curiosity. Served her right.

Tilly stuck her head in the office, murmuring something about filing. It was a weak excuse even to Michelle's see-sawing brain.

Indeed, her PA made no move toward the filing cabinet in the corner.

"You heard," Michelle accused.

"Yes."

"I don't want to discuss it."

Tilly rocked back a little on her sensible heels. "All right, then, I'll change the topic," she said briskly. "Snakepit has a point about how cold it is where Cavaner lives. Are you aware they have a newborn?"

"Of course." She waited a beat, then added, "I let him keep his phone to find accommodation. The point isn't to be cruel, it's to frustrate him into compliance."

"He won't be able to check into a hotel without credit cards."

"I'm aware. But the man has hundreds of friends with mansions; staffers too. Someone will put them up. He will detest asking for help. He'll feel vulnerable."

"He'll be furious," Tilly said.

"And helpless." Michelle felt a gleam of triumph. "Fury and helplessness should get his attention."

"So how do you see it playing out?" Tilly asked, eyes hooded.

"When he calls, outraged and vowing retribution, tell him I'm in a meeting. Keep informing him of that until he stops shouting and starts begging. *Then* you can put him through."

"Of course, Ms. Hastings," came the professional reply. "And *then* we restore all his services?"

"No." Michelle gave her a menacing smile. "Then we wait one more day to test his penitence. He will never challenge us again after this."

"Or he lashes out." Tilly shot her a warning look. "Exposes us. It's a risk."

"I know men like him," Michelle said, unmoved. "He's all bluster. The risk is negligible. He'll be crawling on his belly for forgiveness within two weeks."

“And if he isn’t?”

“I’ll send in O’Brian for a little one-on-one chat. Even his shadow’s intimidating.”

“And when the senator backs down?” Tilly asked.

“Then I’ll make him really suffer. I hear he collects art. French impressionists. I’m wondering how he feels about being parted with a few of them in penance.”

Tilly’s eyebrows went up.

Michelle tapped her lip. “I’ve always thought my office could use a Degas.”

“Really? I had no idea you liked ballet.”

“Of course I don’t like ballet,” Michelle said with a snort. “Little girls painted in fluffy pink tutus? I think not.” Michelle gave her a wide smile. “I like *winning*.”

And just like that, her dark mood evaporated.

* * *

That evening, Michelle let herself into her apartment, dropped her keys into a small glazed ceramic dish by the door, and hung up her coat.

“Safta?” she called, turning on the lights. Why hadn’t her grandmother done so? It was late, and the living room was shrouded in darkness. She hurried to her grandmother’s bedroom, wondering if maybe she’d simply turned in early. Or not. Alarm filled her. “Safta?”

“Out here,” came a thin voice from an unexpected location.

Michelle stopped mid-stride and pivoted. She slid open the door of the balcony and instantly shivered. Hannah was stretched out on a deck chair, legs covered in a tartan blanket, and sipping her usual Four Roses bourbon.

“It’s cold,” Michelle scolded her. “Your chest...”

“Is fine, child. Stop fretting.” She gave a soft cluck.

“What are you doing out here?” Michelle asked, concern snaking into her tone again.

“You worry too much, bubbeleh. I caught sight of the sunset earlier and was entranced. Then I decided to stay for Mother Nature’s floor

show.” She waved at the heavens. “It’s not often we don’t have cloud cover. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Michelle relaxed marginally. “Are you warm enough?”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Hannah’s tone was teasing and gentle.

Michelle dutifully flicked her gaze up, noted yes, indeed, stars were present, same as every other night. “Beautiful,” she muttered dryly.

“Cynic. Now, sit,” her grandmother said, patting the deck chair beside her. “Tell me about your day while we soak up the wonders of the universe.”

“The wonders? How much bourbon have you been drinking?” she teased. Still, she sat.

“Are *you* warm enough?” Hannah waved at Michelle’s business suit. “You could move your chair closer and share my blanket.”

“I’m fine,” Michelle said. Even though it was cold and the hairs on her arms were forming goose bumps, she was used to the cold. She preferred it to being petted like a small child, which her grandmother was guilty of whenever within range. “Work was...”

Michelle paused. Her grandmother knew little about what she did, even though they’d lived together for nine years now, ever since her grandmother had experienced one fall too many. Michelle had spun it as being of mutual benefit—that since her divorce, she wasn’t used to so much space in her huge apartment.

The truth was, Michelle loved her solitude. So, about twice a year, Hannah took an extended stay at a friend’s home in Florida, which enabled Michelle the distance she needed to recharge her mental batteries. It was incredibly thoughtful, but her safta was smart like that.

“Work was what?” Hannah asked. “You didn’t finish your sentence.”

“I hired a new employee.” A flash of Eden Lawless’s quirking mouth, blunt exhortations, and honest eyes filled her head. “A temporary employee,” she felt the sudden urge to clarify. “She’s only with us for ten weeks.”

Why had she added that?

“Ten weeks? I see.” The old woman’s green eyes crinkled. “Well, she’s obviously made an impression.”

Michelle's head snapped sharply to the side to look at her. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you bothered to mention her, even if she's only with you for a little while. You've never mentioned any other employees. I was starting to think you ran that consultancy firm of yours all on your own." Her eyes sparkled. "Tell me about her?"

"You know I run an organization where clients highly value their secrecy," Michelle began. How many times had she reminded her nosy grandmother of this?

"Your employee isn't a client. So, no secrets to share there. Just humor an old woman who doesn't get out anymore. Who can't walk far enough to even go to the park and meet new people without everyone being terrified she'll fall." She waved at her ailing hip and knee. "Talk to me about someone new or my poor, fragile mind will wither away."

Okay, that was just plain manipulative. Rather impressed, Michelle gave her a gentle poke in the side. "I know what you're doing."

"Do you, now?" Hannah smiled serenely. "Are you going to refuse an old woman her dying wish?"

"You are aware your dying wish changes every other hour?"

Hannah shot her a dramatically aggrieved look. "Well, won't you feel bad if this *is* my last one and you just ignored it?"

Michelle laughed. It was an odd sound to her own ears. She'd not found much to laugh about in a long, long time. "Fine, you manipulative old woman," Michelle said lightly. "Her name is Eden. Eden Lawless, if you can believe it."

"Oh, I like the sound of her already. Does she lean more to Biblical gardens or ladies in leather skirts who throw men around a lot?"

"Ex-cuse me?"

"How can *I* know about Lucy Lawless at my age and you don't?"

Michelle peered at her, utterly lost.

"*Xena? Warrior Princess?*" Hannah tried.

"Oh. That." Michelle side-eyed her grandmother, who clearly loved her schlocky TV shows far too much. "So sue me if I've been focused on my career. But, fine. Between Eden and Lawless, she definitely leans to the latter name. She's someone who stirs up trouble."

"And you like that."

“It’s...useful.” Michelle nestled back further into her chair, forgetting about the cold now. “Once upon a time, she made trouble for someone in authority. It didn’t end well for her.”

“Ah.” Her safta looked entranced. “But she didn’t take that lying down?”

“No. I mean, she went away and licked her wounds. But then she rebuilt her life. In fact, she made a whole career out of her particular brand of trouble.”

“Same as you did,” the old woman said firmly, pride in her voice. “When you had your...upset...with the FBI. And with your parents. You made your own path.”

Not the same at all, Michelle wanted to say but absolutely couldn’t. This was not a safe topic. With effort, she pushed the memories away and buried them next to the other not-safe topics.

“Where will you send your new employee?” Her grandmother’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Or will she work in your office?”

Michelle didn’t answer; her safta knew better than this.

Following the silence, Hannah gave a mournful wave and said in Hebrew with an enormous, long-suffering sigh, “*S’iz nisht dayn bobes eysek.*”

It’s none of your grandmother’s business.

The silence dragged out. Michelle debated telling her. After all, who was Hannah going to disclose her secrets to, anyway? The woman never left their apartment, thanks to her poor health and balance issues. She had no contact with her son anymore. And her few friends had no interest in political affairs, preferring to swap recipes and ailments over the phone.

“She’s off to Wingapo,” Michelle said finally.

“Ah,” Hannah said, delight in her tone. “Beautiful place. Shame about the mayor.”

“How do you know about Wingapo? And how have you heard of its mayor?” Michelle asked in surprise. “The place is tiny. Unremarkable in every way.”

“I know its primary industry is soybean,” Hannah replied earnestly. “Or it was until the Chinese markets dried up.”

At Michelle's astonished stare, her safta relented and laughed hard. "All right, I admit, Wingapo came up on one of the news channels a few days ago. Because it's election season, they ran a story on all Maryland's female mayors. Francine Wilson's segment was framed as the 'brilliant property developer turned mayor who can do no wrong.'" Her grandmother waved her hand. "Oh, it was so much baloney. She's shady, that one."

"How can you tell?" Michelle asked, even more astonished.

"Bubbeleh, if you ever want to see who's up to tricks, take a look at where all the honey's being flung."

"The honey?"

"When you try to catch flies, you put out honey. Well, now, that news report put out so much honey, absolutely covered that mayor in it, all this fawning and carry-on, and it made me wonder why they were trying so hard."

"Or it could just be a puff piece?" Michelle said.

"None of the other mayor stories were like that. Wilson's piece was *so* ingratiating! As if she'd *invented* women in politics! I finally decided the mayor had to have paid someone to run the story that way. Or forced them to."

"Mmm." Well, Wilson certainly had form. "Maybe."

"Your maybe is my definitely. Goodness me, it was *such* nonsense." Hannah tapped Michelle's arm gently. "So, what's your troublemaker friend going to do with the mayor?"

"Who said she was going to do anything with her?" *Also, not a friend.*

"The *honey*, bubbeleh. Far too much of it. If you're sending Eden Lawless to Wingapo, I assume it has to be about that mayor." She leaned closer in. "Are you going to expose her?" A childlike delight at the idea sparkled in her grandmother's eyes.

"How do you know I'm not the one *supplying* the honey?" Michelle arched an eyebrow.

"Are you?" Hannah looked at her with genuine interest. "You're the one making Mayor Wilson look good? I thought you'd be more subtle than that."

Michelle smiled at the compliment. "I couldn't tell you either way."

“Well then, I guess I’ll just have to pay attention to the news out of Wingapo, and I’ll see for myself. But you know what else is interesting? The mayor’s election is in *ten weeks*.”

Michelle shook her head. Her grandmother was far too sharp for her own good. “Have you eaten? Shall we order in?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m still full from kugel at lunch. I just want to look at the stars some more. Will you stay and watch with me?”

Michelle had so much work to catch up on. So many emails to reply to. And since Lawless had confirmed she would be doing the Wingapo project, she had to action quite a few job requests to ensure...

“Just a few minutes more, child. Then you can go back to reshaping the world.”

Reshaping the world?

Michelle wondered how and when her grandmother had worked out what her day job was. Or was she just fishing for clues again? “Just a few minutes more.”

“Wonderful.” She sounded delighted. “Now, then, tell me more about this delightful Eden.”

She’s hardly delightful, Michelle wanted to object. But her safta’s expression was too blissful.

“There’s nothing really to say. She does drive the most awful van, though.” As soon as Tilly had left her office, Michelle had sneaked a peek at it from the window. Simple curiosity, of course.

Michelle smiled. “It’s yellow,” she began. “And red and green and blue. A rainbow of colors. It’s covered all over in protest stickers. She calls it Gloria.”

“How unusual! She sounds *so* interesting. That reminds me of my VW bus back in the sixties. Took it to Woodstock and all over California, but I’m sure you don’t want to hear about that.” Her eyes twinkled.

Michelle tried very much not to picture her sweet grandmother getting up to mischief at Woodstock.

Instead, she slid a little closer to the other woman—allowing her to tuck that old tartan blanket over both their legs, patting it exactly so—and lost herself in the stars.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

THE FIXER

BY LEE WINTER

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com