

*“Call the damn elevator guys before I-”* I yell, jabbing a finger at my landlord.

The landlord—an unkempt middle-aged man—gets up, his chair screeching back, and picks up a pair of scissors. He holds it tight enough blood trickles. Through clenched teeth he hisses, “I’m going to kill you if you don’t leave.” His eyes tell me his words ring true.

Rage warms my chest, slurry venom upon my tongue on the verge of spouting. I leave before it burns me out of the only apartment deal I could get after the whole fiasco at work. I let him think he has a chance with me so, anything that happens, he’s in my back pocket.

Even then, Angst could get a family killed, or *me* killed if that elevator goes haywire.

I storm down the hallway, hating where I stomp through even more. This floor of Findley Heights is the *worst*. It was the best, but, that’s just because the landlord *sees* this place. Faux wood walls . Nice hexagonal-patterned hive-like carpet. Go down one floor and it looks like the heart of Detroit.

At the end of the hallway, Ryan walks away after having just had a conversation with Angst. I believe it was Ryan who nicknamed the landlord, “Angst,” over a beer. Angst acted so rebellious in how lazy he is, as well as the questionable posters up in his penthouse, it only made sense we saw him as a teenager.

Angst’s door is still open—which I deliberately left as so. While he’s closing the door, I take out my switchblade and slash a square out of the nice wood-style wallpaper of the hallway—which he paid handsomely for—all while staring at him.

*“YOU SHITHEAD-“* He starts sprinting toward me.

I dart away. Ryan’s keeping the elevator door open. Footsteps echo mine, getting closer and closer. His shadow reaches out for me. He pulls my collar. I swing my forearm into his face. He falls back. *Wow, that was way stronger than-*

*I’d been learning Karate- I’m seconds back in time, hitting him again. No not Karate-*

*I’d been learning Jiu Jitsu- I’m seconds back in time, hitting him again. No not that-*

*No. I pull my hair, stomping my dress shoes against wooden flooring. God why is this so difficult just get it right you dumbsh-*

I’ve been learning martial arts for years after having met Angst. It was only a matter of time I could use it.

I slip into the elevator, Ryan shutting it. Angst fails to slip his hand through. He yells my name and not in the nice way.

I chase after my breath, hands on knees. “Shouldn’t have gone before me.”

“Now you know what it feels like,” he remarks.

The red number goes from the top floor, to the nineteenth, to the eighteenth. It slows. The eighteenth

was where *he* lived. The businessman. The slicked-back hair. The smiles as genuine as plastic surgery. The programmed charisma.

I step behind Ryan.

And when the elevator doors open, we're met with the shadow of Findley Heights.

I stare at us- *NO!*

Nate stares at us, holding a duffle bag. He focuses on Ryan, and then me, the grip on his bag tightening. Then he smiles. "Well, better luck next time!" He laughs, lacking any joy to make it a *laugh*.

We're silent the rest of the way down. The doors open and we exit into the lobby. The lobby has white tiles, a brown-black stripe pattern peeling off the walls, and dirty brown armchairs around a wooden round table who's heard his fair share of disturbing stories. Wilbur—a young man with a glowing blue man on his shirt—paces in circles near the mailboxes the end of the lobby. He sees us and his eyes light up, running over and hugging both of us. Ryan and I pat him on the back.

"Why do mailmen take forever?" Wilbur asks. "I've been here for *years* and it's still not here yet."

I pat him again. "Go down to the comic book store." Behind Wilbur, traffic is slugging. Not even. Their wheels don't spin. Construction's been slow and begun a few blocks down. A new subway route is underway.

"Then what? I can't say thank you like you wanted me to!"

"Good point."

Ryan breaks from the embrace and moves for the door. "Wilbur, when I get back, I'll bring my TV down and we'll watch whatever you want until the package arrives." He looks over his shoulder, smirking. "Pepperoni?"

Wilbur gasps. "Of course!"

I laugh. "Can I join?"

"Guys only," Ryan says, leaving.

I flip him off.

He does it right back at me.

"Don't worry, he's just joking!" Wilbur says.

I nod. "I know, don't worry." I pat him on the back. "I gotta get going too." I move back towards the elevator. "Got two important meetings tomorrow to prepare for. You need someone to keep you company, call me, alright?"

"See you later, Kathy!" The doors shut and I squeeze in a goodbye-wave before my ascension. I return to my room on the eighteenth-

I punch my knee. *You can't live there because I-*

I return to my room on the *fifteenth* floor. The place is much nicer than it should be-

I punch my own face. *What are you-*

My place is quite clean. I like to tidy up lots to keep my head straight. Can't be trying to polish up the world if your own home isn't. I like to think that in a building so horrid, it was nice seeing order for once.

My interview comes first at ten o'clock so I practice in front of the mirror for half an hour, talking to myself about my strengths. I take a break, then do it again. I repeat once more until I've solidly explained everything about myself in quick succession. Next comes the hearing at two o'clock. Not much to do there since my lawyer's got it handled. Well, I hope he does. I might get called up to the stand, so I have to practice *my* side of the story.

I accidentally stabbed my boss. Things got heated after I wrote something *my* way and he didn't like it. I was still holding my pen after I signed some NDA for a story I ghost-wrote. He showed me the door, and he said, "Kathy" in this annoying voice. I spun around yelling "*WHAT!*" And... that's that.

Angst rings my phone.

"What do you want-"

Every word is a dropped brick. "Don't. Use. That. Tone. Of. Voice. With. Me. My room, five minutes, Kathy."

I'm about to say his name, but I forget. The nickname sticks too well. "I pay rent, yes? Soon, I can't. I have to prepare for my shit tomorrow. If I ace this, I'm paying more for rent, got it?" He asks for the time of the interview. I give him it. He says he'll call me.

"You better answer," he says.

"Obviously." I hang up.

I spend the rest of the night relaxing, catching up on TV shows Wilbur is so eager to spoil. Ryan calls me, asking if I want to join them at the mailbox. "Why not?" I say. I join them and we're there almost until three in the morning. We never tell Wilbur mailmen usually don't arrive at three in the morning.

I get up to stretch my legs, looking out at the street. Under the brown streetlights, a homeless man pushing a shopping cart full of his belongings, looks either way before crossing the street. Truck brakes hiss, headlights blinding me. I throw open the door and run outside. "*YO!*"

The homeless man looks at the truck.

The driver honks.

He pushes the shopping cart then jumps out of the way. *Crunch. Clang.* Steel mesh crumbles under three tonnes of man-made marvel. The truck hisses to a stop. The homeless man kneels next to the steel carcass, shoulders slumping. He picks something up. A small body with four legs. "Buddy," he sobs. "Buddy." The dog whines.

A laugh bursts from the sidewalk. Nate points at the homeless man. "That truck is huge! How'd you miss that?"

*The hell?* I want to go over and kick him rights in the nuts. Make him feel *pain*, if he can at all.

Before I know it, Nate's knees touch and he falls to the ground.

Ryan bursts out laughing, Wilbur joining him.

I stand right in front of Nate. I blacked out, didn't I. It's three in the morning. Of course I did. Nate looks up at me, lips pursed, jaw flexing. No flash of those blinding pearly whites. Ice-cold fear stabs me and I'm woozy. Nate looks down, shoulders slumped like the homeless man, dignity stripped from him. He takes his duffle bag and bustles past Ryan and I, head down.

Wilbur's right at the front door, laughing straight in Nate's face.

Nate glares at him. I can't see his expression, but how can something be so horrid it makes Wilbur stop smiling. Nate looks down at Ryan's TV.

"Don't fucking touch it," Ryan says, walking over.

Nate looks at him over his shoulder, then goes on his way. Standing in the elevator, the light casts straight down on him, eyes veiled in darkness. His eyes pierce me, like a blade through black curtains.

The truck driver shuts his car door, breaking me from Nate's spell. He stands over the homeless man, scratching the back of his head. He whispers an apology, even knowing it'll have zero effect.

A blade flashes under the homeless man's coat.

"Wilbur!" I yell, running his way. "Look away!"

The truck driver stumbles back. "Hey hey hey-" Wilbur looks away and faces the TV, hands on ears. *Shick. Shick. Shick. Shick.* The truck driver gurgles, body slumping against the ground. The homeless man then picks up the dog's body, puts it in the passenger's seat and drives off, making sure to run over the truck driver with all eighteen wheels.

Ryan and I make sure Wilbur doesn't see anything, guiding him to the elevator and bringing him back to his room. "Don't look out the window until after the ambulance goes away," I tell him.

Wilbur nods. "Yes, Kathy." He shuts and locks the door. I head back to my room and Ryan retrieves his TV. I can't sleep that night. Not until five in the morning when I'm too tired to think anymore.

I wouldn't call it sleep. *Shick shick shick* I heard all night.

I hear ambulance sirens in my dreams. I realize they're not from dreams.

My alarm shocks me awake at ten o'clock after being ignored for three hours, mixed with the sirens. *Ten o'clock?* A bunch of messages from Wilbur take up my inbox. I leap out of bed and get dressed, hoping I look nice. Not a mirror in sight to check otherwise. On the way to the elevators, I read Wilbur's messages.

7:31: He's here! Kathy come quick! Ryan's at work!

7:33: He's staring at me. What do I do.

7:34: Kat! Kathy! Come on!

7:35: Two missed calls from Wilbur.

7:41: One missed call from Wilbur.

7:45: He wrecked it Kat. absolutely destroyed it. he stomped on it and yelled at me and punched me in my stomach and kicked me in my stomach.

7:47: Where are you Kat?

8:00: Kat?

I click the elevator button and wait.

I watch the red floor number above the doors. *Twenty...nineteen...Eighteen.*

It stops at eighteen.

Then, it passes seventeen, sixteen... The elevator grumbles right in front of the doors. They pull away. The businessman stands there in the center. He doesn't make room for me. I look at my phone. Ten past ten. Crap.

I brush by Nate and stand in the corner, holding my breath. The doors shut and we descend. *Fourteen...thirteen...twelve...* The elevator yawns, its steel cables rubbing its eyes. It takes a nap, the lights flickering. We're stuck at floor eleven. Nate stares at me in the reflection of the doors. The elevator wakes and descends another floor. It's slumber is permanent. We're indefinitely stuck at floor ten. Fifteen past ten now.

Nate doesn't budge. I don't know if I can slip by and press the emergency button, or if he'd let me at all. I'm frozen. Every second lasts an hour. I check my watch again. It takes me a couple seconds to read, my hand shaking too much. Twenty past ten.

*BRRRRRING.* My phone blasts and vibrates, my heart leaping. I fumble for my phone and drop it. It clatters and lands at Nate's toes. The floor vibrates, my ringtone humming. I reach for it. Nate's staring down at me. I snatch the phone and answer. Nate stares at me through the reflection of the doors.

"Yes?"

"This is Kathy Brown, yes?"

"Yes."

"You got ten more minutes before you're excluded from our prospects list. We found lots of promise with you and I'd hate to--"

"I'm...stuck in an elevator." Nate's knuckles are bruised and torn.

"Where?"

"Findley Apartments."

"Alright, I'm sending help. I was sure you wouldn't be holding us up for no reason."

"Thanks." Nate's shoes are scuffed, bits of plastic lodged into the sole.

"See you in a bit then."

I get a text from her a few minutes later, saying, "Help should be there in three hours. Traffic's real bad." I shut off my phone. I can hear my own breathing. It's shuddering. Nate can definitely hear it. I try and breathe slower. Deeper. My heart won't follow, galloping.

Nate speaks, scaring me. "Got some nice interviewers, don't you."

"Ye-ye-ye-yes." I nod frantically. "Very nice."

I don't know *exactly* what he said next as he muttered it, like it was only meant for him to hear, but I made out, "Maybe in the lake." I no longer control my breath. It's frantic. Shallow. Quick. Fear sinks talons deep into me. My skin feels like it's burning. The elevator is a fraction of the size I remember it being. In the reflection of the elevator...the longer I look at it, the more I see through Nate-

Nate stands in the way of his reflection, looking down at me.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I back away an inch. “I-I-I blacked out. The guy and the-the-the truck, I wasn’t thinking straight. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I shift uncomfortably, breaking eye contact.

He smiles. “Oh. I see now. Don’t worry.” His grin doesn’t draw away from his lifeless toy-doll eyes. “Why are you stuttering, Kat?”

“I’m-I’m-I-I-I have speech impediment problems.”

“Wow. That must be horrible.” His smile widens. “Had it since you were a kid?”

“Yes.”

“Must be hard, living like that. I can’t *imagine*.”

I nod. “Life is-is hard, yep.” He doesn’t respond. People like talking about themselves. This guy must too. “How a-a-about you? What’s your story?”

Nate massive smile loses all life. “Amazing. Thanks for asking.”

I gesture to his suit. “Tell me about the...the getup. Comfy in bed?”

He laughs. “You’re so funny. Of course not.”

“So, why?”

“I like looking sharp.”

I can’t push too hard. “You definitely do. I wish I could be just as stylish.”

“Wow, thank you!” His smile looks genuine for the first time, softening his hardened eyes. “I try my best. You, on the other hand, look amazing! Like straight out of a movie. Perfect in every way.”

“Thanks.” I nod. How do I respond to compliments? “Means a lot.” I redirect the conversation. “You got any hobbies?”

“Yep. For my job, I help optimize packaging. Figure out how to take their product apart to save space in storage like...” He gestures to me. “You. You got hobbies? What do you do for a living?”

“I’m...unemployed actually. It’s a...whole thing. Accidentally stabbed my boss and shit-“

Nate uncontrollably laughs and wheezes. I join him, lightly chuckling. He looks at me. “That reminds me of this-“ His laugh interrupts him. When he calms down he says, “That reminds of when- You know that guy, Rask? Guy who killed his whole family?” He giggles.

My smile fades. “Yeah.”

“All I thought was...’Damn, he must’ve went to the wrong house then.’” He snickers, possessed by his own humour. “Isn’t that funny?”

I weakly laugh. “Yes. Very funny.” I swallow my puke.

His laughs depart. “You’ve never been humiliated, right?”

“I have. Everyone has.”

“Like what? Tell me a story.”

My mind draws blanks. “I...I can’t think of one. I’ll get back to you on that.” He keeps staring at me. I rack my brain. My heart beats louder than I can think. I make one up. “I was presenting during chemistry class and I-I-I-I...” I thumb the hem of my sweater. “My stutter came on when I said... copper. I could only say ‘cah,’ the first syllable, and...you know how that sounds. I was red as a tomato.”

Nate cracks a smile. “That’s funny. Must’ve been anxious because when you’re angry...it’s like you

don't even have it."

"How do you mean?"

His lifeless smile spreads. "When you speak to Angst and you tell him about the elevator, you're like a business man. Confident. Powerful. Unstoppable. I guess speech impediments are emotion-specific, yes?" He smiles wider.

"It's probably not that..." He's cornered me.

"You lie to me." He smiles wider, like a demented doll. "You humiliate me--"

*BRRRRRING*. My phone rings again. It's Angst-

Nate shatters and stomps on the phone again and again, swearing and grunting with each strike. "You humiliate me, Kathy." He picks up the phone and throws it at the wall. It bounces and *cracks*, clanging to the ground. He looks me dead in the eye and I shrink back.

Tears roll down my face, teeth chattering. "I'm-I'm-I'm so-so-so-so--"

"Shut *up* with your-your-your stutter!" He punches me in the face. "Shut the *hell* up!" I back up. He kicks my stomach and I fall to my knees. He knees my teeth in and the back of my head smacks the back wall. I fall to my side and he buries his foot in my stomach again and again. I flick open my switchblade and slash his Achilles. He falls, groaning. I flit the blade to his neck, spasming it across his arteries. Blood gushes, reddening his white collared shirt. He punches me and gets on top of me, bringing his elbows down on me, screaming. Each strike is weaker than the last until he collapses next to me, his face perpetually emotionless.

The reflection from the door is...odd. There is no slain man...and I am wearing a suit.

I shut the fridge door on Kathy's severed head and drift to the front door, dress shoes scratching the wooden floor. I round the stacked boxes and leave my apartment, taking the elevator. In the door reflection, I wear Kathy's attire.

I'm now the most perfect being to exist.

I can't keep in my smile.