



Tinsel Town Cleaners

BILL TO: Mr. Jack
INVOICE NO: B922114
INVOICE DATE: 10/22/2023
NET 1

DESCRIPTION
EXECUTIVE CLEANING PACKAGE



NOTES
We really enjoyed working on this project with you and
look forward to working with in the future. Please
let us know if there is anything else we can do.

Thank You!
SEE REVERSE FOR TERMS OF SERVICE



- TINSEL TOWN CLEANERS -

by
John Bergin & Dustin Blegstad

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Any real, semi-real or similar names, places, people, products, services and locales are used purely for satirical purposes, and the corresponding story details are purely fictional. The articles contained herein are to be considered satire, parody, surrealism, and humor.

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1

“Jack?” Sheila called from downstairs. “There’s a package here for you.”

“Oh my, a package!” Jack said with feigned excitement. He slipped into his leather Marsèll Guardella slippers, tightened the sash of his Versace robe, and pranced down the stairs. “I feel so special.” He leaped from the bottom step and winced at the pop in his right knee.

Jack strutted down the hallway, continuing past the theater, past his office, and past the room furnished like a parlor that no one ever used. A section of laminated flooring creaked under his foot, and, mildly annoyed, he set a mental reminder to tell Sheila to call someone about fixing it. Two steps further down the hallway he had already forgotten about it.

He strolled into the kitchen and grabbed his iPad and a mug of steaming coffee from the butcher block island. The mug boldly declared in big blocky letters;

I'M ONLY *ACTING* LIKE AN ASSHOLE

Jack saw Sheila sitting at the breakfast table on the patio, taking in the morning sun. She was scrolling through emails on her tablet and sipping one of her weirdly-named, overly fancy espresso concoctions. *Shot in the Dark? Shot in the Eye? Con Crema Noisettio? Affageto Somethingetto?* He could never remember the names of the

drinks she whipped up. He took his coffee black, and Sheila was unmatched in brewing it exactly how he liked it.

He stepped outside and joined his assistant. “Who’s it from?”

Sheila nodded at a package on the table. A standard USPS Priority Mail cardboard box. “Return address says it’s from Tinsel Town Cleaners. Ring a bell?”

Shards of ice stabbed Jack’s spine, and his vision whipped into a dolly-zoom. He was momentarily stunned that his eyesight had given way to filmmaking trickery, but then he chalked it up as a hazard (or skill perhaps) of his profession. Like a shot from a Hitchcock or Spielberg film, the box loomed larger and larger in his view while the background blurred and moved further away. *Chief Brody feared the worst, he thought, and now the worst was happening.*

Sheila looked up at Jack, concerned by his silence. “You okay?” Her long-time charge was a nice enough man in his old age, but his wild years had left scar tissue on that extraordinary thespian brain of his—damage that occasionally manifested itself in the form of odd behavior. It wasn’t uncommon for her to come upon him standing in the middle of a room, gazing blankly into space as if he’d entered the room and immediately forgotten why he’d gone into it. Another example of odd behavior was being spooked by an innocuous package. “Jack?”

Jack snapped out of his private Spielberg shot and gave Sheila a quick grin. “Sure. Knee is giving me a bit of trouble, is all. All good, Sheil.” He performed a light two-step for her. “Cha-cha-cha.”

Sheila held his glance long enough to let him know she knew he was bullshitting—that something was up. She also knew him well enough to drop it.

Jack stepped closer to the table and peered down at the package. “Tinsel Town Cleaners. Huh.”

“You know what that is?” Sheila asked.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. I’ll take it to my office.”

Jack set his coffee and iPad on the table and gently slid the

package into his hands. The shipping label bore his name and address, and in the top left corner, printed in light blue ink; a logo depicting a uniformed cleaning man giving a thumbs-up and smiling a sparkling smile. Below the logo, designed to recall 1950s sign-painter lettering;

Tinsel Town Cleaners

Jack slid the package off the table and held it before himself, keeping it away from his body.

Sheila raised an eyebrow. “You’re holding it like you think there’s a bomb in there.”

Jack shrugged. “It could be weird fan mail disguised as something official-looking. Remember last month? The flashlight?”

“The *used* flashlight. How could I forget?”

Jack hefted the box. It weighed almost nothing, and shaking it produced no sound. “Feels empty, anyway.”

Sheila stood and stepped toward the kitchen. “I’m getting a refill. Need anything?”

Jack glanced at Sheila’s back as she walked into the kitchen, heading for the espresso machine they’d flown in from Italy. “No thanks. I’m good.” He looked at the box in his hands. “It’s probably one of those prop gift things that you get sometimes. Like in the style of a movie? A, uh... what’s it called... a gift wrap? I mean a wrap gift.” Jack hadn’t worked for years but knew this box was *not* that. “Didn’t we help finance a picture about a cleaning company or something last year?” he further embellished.

Jack looked toward the kitchen to confirm Sheila was still facing away from him. She was. She wasn’t really listening to him, either. Good. He retreated from the patio and scooted down the hall toward his office, robe flapping in his wake like a cape.

He closed the office door with a gentle *click*, hesitated, then locked it, hoping Sheila hadn’t heard him do so. He carried the

box to his desk, passing shelves and a wall space decorated with accolades and memorabilia from his decades-long acting career. A *vast* wall space and *leagues* of shelving, mind you. Holding pride of place, the golden Mr. McMurphy. His first Oscar. Flanked by Mr. Breedlove and Mr. Udall. Spread across the shelves were more statues and certificates of nomination than he could count. Golden Globes, BAFTAs, SAG Awards, Grammys. He'd had an impressive career, of that, there was no doubt.

Jack placed the parcel on his desk, adjusting it to be perfectly centered and squared.

He sat, the leather of his Antonio Citterio Vitra Grand Executive Highback office chair creaking softly as he settled. Alone now, he let his face drop, his shoulders slump. *Let's get this over with.*

He slid open the desk's center drawer and selected a letter opener resembling a miniature Excalibur. The thought briefly flitted through his mind that maybe the box was a bomb after all. Some sort of new-fangled hi-tech plastic explosive that weighed nothing rigged to explode the moment he tampered with the package. *Stupid*, he thought. *They wouldn't do that.*

He cut the tape on the sides and drew a slit down the top of the package. The flaps sprung open a few inches.

No explosion. Wonders never cease.

Jack realized he was clenching his jaw and tried to relax. He was sweating. *Jesus Christ*, he told himself. *Get a hold of yourself, Jackie-boy.*

He carefully folded the two side flaps back and then the next two, top and bottom.

He looked inside.

Three items were taped to the bottom of the box. An invoice. A Polaroid. A wooden match.

He reached in, pinched the corner of the Polaroid between his fingers, and plucked it free.

A shot of him—a much younger him—taken by someone standing over his sleeping body. The lighting was terrible, the

picture was a little blurry around the edges, and the Polaroid was faded with the patina of time, but it was definitely him. He lay on his back in a king-sized bed. His eyes were closed. He was fast asleep, signature grin plastered across his dreaming face.

He was hugging a severed human leg like a body pillow.

Those girls, he thought. Idiot.

2

He had met them at the *Postman Always Rings Twice* premiere after-party. An elaborate ballroom affair with a red carpet, loud music, a bar serving up rivers of booze, and a replica of the kitchen table from *that* scene—the scene which had triggered Lana Turner to declare their remake of her precious film “Pornographic!”

Replica? Hell, they’d shot *Postman* in Santa Barbara. Some poor production assistant had probably been tasked with driving out there and hauling the actual table and chairs back to Hollywood just for the party. They’d even gone so far as to reconstruct the set by placing a couple loaves of homemade bread and depression-era dinnerware on the table.

There was one way to determine whether the table was a replica or the actual prop: examine the underside. Jack recalled lying beneath the table with Jessica between takes. She had doodled on the bottom with a Bic pen while he etched their initials into the wood with a knife. It was no secret that he’d been smitten with his co-star. Their much-lauded on-screen chemistry in *Postman* was genuine, but they’d kept it professional. Playful, flirty, sure, but thoroughly professional.

The table sat beneath a beautiful Waterford crystal chandelier that should have commanded the ballroom. Upstaged by a rickety wooden table. Jessica laughed the moment she arrived and laid eyes on the set-up. A real knee-slapping, snorkeling guffaw. Then she plopped her ass on the table, hiked up her dress, and struck the

same spread-leg pose from the one sheet. A dozen guys lined up to pose for photos with the young actress. What a trooper. She was gonna go far in the biz. She spotted Jack through the crowd and beckoned him to join her.

I am not drunk enough for this, Jack thought. He tipped an imaginary hat to Jessica, then headed for the bar.

And that's when he met the two girls.

"Wow, I can't believe it's you!" The blonde.

"Is the nurse lady mean in real life?" The red-head.

"Do you still have the axe?" The blonde again.

Jack patted the air to slow the girls down.

"It is me." Flash them The Grin.

"No. Louise is very nice." Hand over heart, so sincere.

"Yes. It's at my place." Kubrick glare, head down, brow furrowed.

"Ooooh, can we see it?" Both girls, in unison.

Yeah, Jack, show them the axe. Great idea, he thought. Wait. Did he think that?

Drinks. Score some powder from the bartender. Good stuff. More drinks. More powder. More questions. More talk about the axe. *Do it. Do it. Do it.* Who's voice was that in his head? Was that his voice? *The axe is at the bungalow, and you just got that new bed. California King. Thing takes up half the bedroom. Big enough to hold all three of us! Yes! Yes! Do it!*

"Gather your coats, my dears!" Jack pointed his index finger at the ceiling and held it high as if he were about to lead a Great Expedition. "To the axe!"

Driving too fast through the hills. Frantic kissing and groping. More powder. *Gonna need to get more powder at some point*, urged the voice. More driving. At the front door. Fumbling keys and giggling. Trying to find the right key. There it is. Swing the door open. Welcome! Welcome! Gather around the fully stocked bar. More drinks.

And there it was. Mounted above the fireplace mantle.

The axe.

The girls held their breath. A moment of reverent silence.

Jack crossed the room, stepped up to the axe, and grabbed the handle. The girls squealed with delight. He gave them a playful, evil smile over his shoulder, then lifted the tool from its mounting hooks.

“Swing it!” the dumb one shouted. No, the other dumb one. They’re both the dumb one. He’s the dumb one.

Jack approached the bar and faced the girls, gripping the axe tightly.

“Show us how you swing it!” the other dumb one said.

He took a short, half-hearted swing at the empty space before him, impressing no one, including himself. The girls looked at each other, then to Jack with polite, disappointed smiles.

“No, *really* swing it,” the blonde one encouraged.

“Like in the movie,” the red-head added.

“If you do, I’ll show you something niii-iiice,” the blonde hiccupped, running her hands over her hips.

Jack told himself to drop all pretense and go for it. He was an actor, after all. This is what he does! Play to the crowd! Embody a role! Throw caution to the wind! “Heeeeere’s Johnny!” Jack leaned back and swung the axe with all his might in a wide downward arc, burying it in the wooden bar. The shockwave launched his drink into the air, splattering the ceiling with single-malt scotch.

The girls screamed, cheered, clapped, and waved their arms. The party had finally arrived.

Thing is still sharp as hell, Jack thought as a drop of liquor pattered from the ceiling onto his forehead.

The blonde brayed with laughter, then stood and threw her head back. She tipped her glass and poured her drink down her throat, one giant gulp after another, waving her free hand as if to say *Wait... Wait... Wait...* A final swallow and she slammed the empty glass on the bar. “Spank me with it!”

Jack stopped rocking the head of the axe back and forth to free it. “What? *Spank* you with it?”

“Yeah, spank her!” The red-head said, like it was the best idea she’d heard all year. “She’s been naughty, and she needs to be *punished*.”

Jack looked back and forth at each of them, trying to determine whether this was a joke. It was not.

The blonde leaned over the bar, gripped the opposite edge, and stood on her tip-toes, pointing her satin-pants-clad ass into the air. “Spank me, Jack. Red rum.”

This is getting to be a bit much, Jack thought. *The joke is over. Take it easy.* The other voice told him the first voice was the sound of not getting laid tonight. He adjusted his grip on the axe.

After a series of exaggerated Looney-Tune wind-ups, Jack leaned forward and playfully tapped the blonde’s ass with the flat side of the axe head.

“Booooo!” both girls cried with mock anguish as if they’d just witnessed a baseball player miss a catch that would have won his team the World Series.

“Wow,” the blonde scoffed, looking over her shoulder at Jack, “Who let my little brother in here?”

Jack—wounded by the girls’ disappointed response and emboldened by how this night had been playing out—made a decision. *She wants a spanking? I’ll give her a spanking.*

For the rest of his life, Jack would remain unsure about the intention behind his next action. Did he purposefully adjust his grip, or not?

He widened his stance, drew back, and swung the axe. Not as hard as he could, but *almost*. Enough to show the girls he meant it.

The head whispered through the silence with a soft *swoosh*, followed by a wet *thunk* as the blade struck the blonde in the crease where her leg and buttock met, finally stopping at bone.

Two seconds passed. Nobody made a sound.

Then everybody made a sound. Lots of sounds. Mostly screaming. Some them, some him. The screaming had to stop, though. He had neighbors. People have to work in the morning. Can’t be up all night listening to screaming. Pretty quickly, the girls

stopped screaming, though. All under control. Nobody panic. The situation was at hand.

More drinks, more powder.

This is not good.

Fuck.

3

Jack had been staring through the Polaroid into the past. He brought his focus back to the present. Back to the horrible photo. The severed leg. *Did he intentionally reverse the axe so it was sharp-side forward? Did he?*

He set the photo on his desk and clasped his hands together to stop them shaking.

He let his gaze roam over the shelves and the wall space displaying his awards and commendations. Over five decades. A career to be proud of. His life would have been so very, very different if it hadn't been for Tinsel Town Cleaners.

He had Hopper to thank for that.

4

After a grueling and unproductive day shooting *Easy Rider*, Jack and Dennis liberated a couple choppers from the motor pool and biked to a nearby lake where they shared a couple (or six) joints. They staked out a spot near the water's edge and sat under fragrant pines to watch the setting sun paint the sky brilliant shades of purple and orange.

Hopper laid some wisdom on Jack, the fresh young talent.

"We all fuck up, man. It goes with the territory. They treat you like you're different, like some kind of deity. You start to act like it

after a while. And that's when you fuck up. You'll see. But some fuckups are bigger than others. And some problems don't just go away on their own. You know what I mean, man?"

Jack didn't, but mildly stoned, he nodded politely to his elder statesman.

Jack was eager to escape the deadly, stale world of production offices and boardrooms—work he had fallen into after trekking from the East Coast to Los Angeles. He wanted to be in front of the lens and worried that dream was foundering. His acting career thus far had been unrewarding bit parts in low-budget films. He'd finally caught a break, stepping in to replace Rip Torn after the notoriously difficult actor and Hopper had a falling out during pre-production on *Easy Rider*. *Easy* was Jack's first major role alongside A-list talent, and he was soaking it in.

Everything about this side of filmmaking made him feel alive. Rehearsing. Improvising. Losing himself in a role. When he wasn't on the call sheet, he'd hang around the set anyway, shadowing László and Baird, their cinematographers, or Len and Paul, their ADs. Dennis had even let him operate the camera on a few shots. It was astonishing to Jack how fake and ridiculous their costumes, props, and sets appeared—their goofy get-ups cheaper than dime-store Halloween costumes and their makeup so thick it looked like someone had scribbled on their faces with crayons. But when Jack bent his eye to the viewfinder and observed the world through the camera lens, everything looked *whole*. Realer than real. Bigger than life. Even more so when he watched dailies. The flickering images flashed before his eyes on a silver screen, and he wondered, "How did we *do* this?" Certainly, the crew was talented and experienced, but there was more to it than that. The lens transformed everything it observed. It was the greatest magic trick Jack had ever witnessed, and he was absolutely addicted to it.

Hopper took a deep drag and held the smoke in his lungs, breathing inward as he spoke. "You wreck a car, smack a photographer, get busted with some grass; call your agent, call your

lawyer.” He exhaled, leaned in close, and looked around to confirm they were alone. “You do something that would ruin your entire existence—and trust me, man, you will—when you do, you call these guys.” He handed Jack a business card.

“Tinsel Town Cleaners,” Jack read the card aloud. Under the company name, a logo depicted a uniformed cleaning man, smiling, looking sharp and capable. The card held no other information save a phone number.

Hopper scooted closer. “Got that card from Brando. Saved my ass a few times. Enough times to know that number by heart.” He let out a burst of machine-gun laughter. “Seriously, though,” he said, glancing around again. “That’s the number you call. The price is steep, but it’s worth it.”

5

The rest of that horrible night with those two girls had been a blur to Jack.

Rummaging through his desk in a blind panic, trying to remember where he’d put the Cleaners’ card. *Abh! There it is!* Feeling triumphant for finding it, then deflated as he held the phone’s earpiece in his lap, listening to the dial tone with no idea what to say to whoever would answer the line.

Should I burn the place down? He wondered. *Turn myself in?*

Hell, no.

Looking around at the mess, there was no way he could deal with this himself. He was screwed. But he was also sure this was precisely what Hopper had warned him about.

A burst of courage (more powder), and he dialed the number.

The bland, calm man who answered seemed to already know why Jack was calling. Not that he knew exactly what Jack had done, but he understood Jack was in some seriously deep shit and that, no

worry, Tinsel Town Cleaners would take care of everything. Jack felt like he was speaking with a concierge about travel arrangements.

Who the fuck are these people? Jack asked himself.

The call was over in less than two minutes.

Jack hung up, gently setting the earpiece back in its cradle. Problem solved. *This calls for a celebration*, that other voice declared.

More drinks. The last of the powder.

Jack's last thought before blacking out was; *What were those girls' names anyway?*

He woke to darkness. Not pitch black, but dark.

The memory of the evening's events rolled over him like distant thunder.

He stumbled out of bed and slapped for the light switch several times until he found it. His bedroom. It was... just fine. Clean. The clock on his nightstand said it was 11:30 p.m. How long had he been out? An entire day? Two?

Bewildered and groggy, Jack backed out of the doorway and made his way down the short hall to the living room, which was... also just fine.

Unbelievable. There was no way he'd dreamed it. It was too vivid. Too real.

Jack made his way to the bar, and there it was. Evidence. The deep gash he'd cut into the top of the bar was still there. He ran his finger over the rut. This was real.

Three objects sat atop the bar. A wooden match, a Polaroid, and an invoice from Tinsel Town Cleaners.

And then the smell came to him, finally worming its way into his brain through ruined, coke-singed nostrils. Fresh paint.

He studied the walls of the living room. Had they always been that exact shade of eggshell white? He couldn't recall. He looked down at the floor. A brown Persian rug. Definitely not the same Missoni Saporiti patchwork rug his interior designer had

so enthusiastically selected. In his mind's eye, Jack saw buckets of bright red blood splashed across the clean geometric patterns the Italian textile firm was famous for. *That Persian rug is definitely new*, he thought. *So, this is the service Tinsel Town Cleaners provides. They make the bad go away. Completely. Permanently.*

Jack picked up the invoice. It listed one line item.

EXECUTIVE CLEANING PACKAGE (QTY: 1)
RATE/PRICE: 1 DUELLUM

Below that, a note:

We enjoyed working on this project with you and look forward to working with you in the future. Please let us know if there is anything else we can do.

Jack turned the invoice over. The Cleaners' terms of service were printed in a microscopic typeface on the back. He squinted, unable to focus his bleary eyes, though he could see many Latin words. Fuck it, he gave up. It was giving him a headache, and he was never going to read it anyway. The terms were probably a reiteration of what the bored guy on the phone had told him last night. *Our services are costly, as you know. Lest there be any confusion about our terms, sir, let me state this for you as clearly as I can: While you don't have to pay today, one day you will.*

Jack crumpled the invoice and let it drop onto the bar. He didn't want to look at the Polaroid. He flipped it over, but not before seeing that it was a shot of himself, passed out and hugging a severed human leg.

Jack presumed the match was for burning the invoice and the photograph. Destroying the last few pieces of evidence.

He needed a drink first.

6

Jack flipped the old Polaroid over so it was face down on his desk. It wasn't the same print the Cleaners had left for him to find the morning after. He'd burned that one. That this Polaroid was so similar to the one from all those years ago sent a clear message: *Where there's one, there's more.* The Cleaners probably had an entire photo album filled with evidence of his escapade.

Jack reached into the box and lifted out the sheet of paper. A copy of the original invoice. Again, the single line item;

EXECUTIVE CLEANING PACKAGE (QTY: 1)

And at the bottom of the invoice, something new. A set of instructions.

CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON
MEET YOUR OPPONENT
4:00 p.m. TODAY

Followed by a series of numbers—a geo-location, he guessed, that he was expected to punch into his phone. And then;

NON-COMPLIANCE RESULTS
IN RELEASE OF EVIDENCE

He turned the invoice over. Same legalese. Same Latin. Printed in the same godawful tiny typeface.

Is this it? he thought. Choose a weapon, go to a random location, meet someone, and his debt was settled?

Maybe he hadn't dwelled enough on the events of that night and the subsequent clean-up over the years—not as much as he should have, anyway, and not as seriously, either. Sure, the memory had haunted him the first couple of years, but he guessed it didn't weigh on him the way most people would have worried about it. It was a long time ago. Sometimes, the memory felt like it belonged to someone else. A story someone had told him. He'd even managed to forget about it for long periods.

He had been an idiot back then, and maybe that was a good enough excuse for not dwelling on the past. He liked to think he'd grown wiser with age, but if that was true, he had to ask himself how he had lived with the knowledge of what he'd done for so long? Where was the guilt? The remorse?

He'd fucked up plenty of times, but never as bad as that night and never so bad that his agent couldn't smooth things over. The Incident (as he called it) was the only time Jack had employed Tinsel Town Cleaners. Just the once and never again. He'd learned his lesson, and that counted for something, didn't it? Wasn't that a form of remorse?

He'd never told a soul about the Cleaners. That was another detail the bored man on the phone had made clear. *Tell no one.* Like that needed to be said. Telling anyone about the Cleaners and the service they provided would lead to the one question Jack had been too polite (let's be honest; too afraid) to ask Hopper all those years ago. *What did you do?*

What *did* Hopper do? He said he'd called the Cleaners more than once. What the hell had he done? And what about Brando? What did old Mr. Mumbles do that was so bad he had to call the Cleaners?

Jack returned to his conversation with Hopper beside the lake. He rifled through the memory, envisioning his fingers flipping through the moments as if they were a stack of notecards. Hopper

had been practically evangelizing about the Cleaners that day. *We all fuck up, man. It goes with the territory.* Jack's fingers paused on that notecard and lifted it into the light.

We all fuck up.

Hopper and Brando had used the Cleaners.

Jack himself had used the service.

That's three of us, Jack thought. Had other celebrities called on the Cleaners?

We all fuck up, man.

How many of us? Dozens? Hundreds?

And how long have the Cleaners been around?

"What the fuck is going on?" Jack whispered to his office. A question that could no longer be ignored now that Tinsel Town Cleaners were collecting their due.

There was one way to answer that question.

Choose your weapon.

Jack rested his elbows on the desk, pursed his lips, and templed his fingers into a triangle under his nose. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth "Tk. Tk. Tk." His eyes scanned the office. McMurphy? He could brain an opponent with the guy—he was solid bronze plated with 24-karat gold—but he didn't want to tarnish the statue or dent it. "Tk. Tk. Tk." The little Excalibur letter opener? Don't be ridiculous. "Tk.Tk. Tk." An autographed Lakers jersey? He could suffocate or strangle someone with it. No. Who was he kidding? He was no longer spry enough.

Meet your opponent.

This wasn't going to be a real duel, surely. Some sort of theatrical face-off, more likely. A performance staged for whom Jack had no idea, but he knew one thing: he wanted to look good. Impressive. Commanding. Unforgettable. He was, after all, a star, and stars always shined.

Choose your weapon.

His eyes roamed the room again. "Tk.Tk. T--"

The axe.

He still had it. It was right there on the wall, mounting hooks holding it in place among his awards and accolades.

A few years ago, one of the axes from the shoot had been sold at auction for \$175,000 and put on display in the Stanley Hotel in Colorado. One of the half-dozen *prop* axes made of foam and resin, that is. The one true axe was right there on his wall.

Jack stared at it. The clean wooden handle. The heavy metal head. *Bet it's still sharp*, he thought. Would it bring good luck? Bad luck? Considering its role in this affair, would it be in poor taste? Or would it be perfectly poetic?

Answer: all of the above.

In other words, a show-stopper.

Jack let out a proud chuff and stood.

Several minutes later, Jack—dressed in comfortable silk sweatpants, a maroon t-shirt under a white dinner jacket, RayBan sunglasses, brand new Jordans, and carrying an oversized duffel bag—walked down the hall toward the front door.

“Heading out?” Sheila asked as he passed the kitchen. She was chopping potatoes and watching a morning news show on her tablet, which she had propped up on the island.

“Yea. Running an errand.”

“Anything exciting?” She asked.

“No,” he answered, adjusting the duffel on his shoulder and feeling more than a little distracted. “Just a thing I have to do,” he continued, trying to sound a little more present.

“Need help?”

“Nope.”

“You left your coffee on the patio. Would you like a travel mug?”

Jesus, Jack thought, rolling his eyes internally. He loved Sheila dearly, but she was oblivious to her mothering. Wait, that was not fair. She’d taken great care of him over the years and had put up with a lot. She didn’t know about The Incident, but she knew about

plenty of others. He'd worked hard to curb his reckless behavior, and hiring her was a big part of that. She knew enough about him to have been wholly justified in tapping out. Instead, she stayed on. She had the patience of a saint and was one of the few genuinely kind and decent people he knew. He trusted her. In another life, he might have been attracted to her and asked her to marry him. She might have felt the same and even said yes. But their relationship was perfect for both of them the way it was. Both of them lonely, but not alone. Friends in contentment.

"No, I'm good. I'll be out for a while," Jack said, turning from the kitchen doorway.

Sheila knew it was better not to ask him about his business directly. "Well, I'm making a roast for this evening."

Jack returned to the doorway, stuck his head around the frame, and looked at Sheila intensely. She stopped chopping and looked up, catching his serious face briefly before he flashed her The Grin and said, "Sounds lovely."

She smiled, blushed ever-so-slightly (only someone who knew her as well as Jack would have noticed), and looked down to continue chopping potatoes.

Jack knew The Grin's effect on her, especially when coupled with a compliment. "Sheil?"

"Yes, Jack?" Looking up again.

"Thanks."

Jack was still wearing The Grin, but his eyes seemed off to Sheila. Distant. A little sad. "Thanks for what?"

"Everything you do for me."

"You sure you're okay?" She smirked and cocked her hip, limply pointing the knife at him.

"Absolutely." He rapped his knuckles on the door frame three times in quick succession as if declaring the matter settled and the conversation over.

Sheila gave him a playful side-eye, then returned to what she was doing. "Okay, then."

“Don’t forward any calls, please.” Jack let The Grin fall from his face and headed for the front door.

“See you in a while.” Sheila continued chopping, occasionally glancing at the news show on her tablet. The newswoman said it would be a balmy seventy-eight degrees “...and in tragic news, actor Kit Harington, best known for his role as John Snow on the popular show *Game of Thrones*, has died at age thirty-six. His publicist says the actor died suddenly of an undiagnosed illness, shocking friends and family.”

“My god, that’s awful,” Sheila said. Outside, she heard the *beep-beep-beep* of Jack’s Range Rover tailgate opening and then closing.

7

The 210. Eastbound. Jack kept the Range Rover just under the speed limit, classic rock playing at low volume, Mick Jagger reminding him that he just might get what he needs.

Traffic slowed. Then, it slowed again, finally settling into its usual stop-and-go crawl.

Jack’s mind wandered. *It’s been a pretty good run*, he thought. He had everything he needed, got to do what he wanted, and nobody gave him a hard time about anything. If he wanted to work, he did. If he didn’t? Shrug. He’d done a lot, seen a lot, and most of it was enviable. Audiences still loved him, and let’s not forget he’d always done okay with the ladies, even considering a few mistakes.

Yes, life had been pretty damn good.

Now it was Bowie on the radio, telling him his Golden Years would be golden. Got that right. *Gold, whop whop whop*, indeed.

A wry smile settled on Jack’s lips. This should have happened a long time ago. It was time to settle this old debt and enjoy a carefree ride through the rest of his Golden Years.

Traffic cleared as he passed through Rancho Cucamonga, and he edged the Rover up to the speed limit. He checked his mirrors,

switched lanes, and took the 15 exit, heading north toward the Mojave Desert.

He was confident that as soon as Bowie wrapped it up, Steppenwolf would come on to remind him that he was born to be wild.

Wouldn't that be just?

After an hour of driving the straight-as-an-arrow interstate, Jack glanced at his phone mounted to the dash. The map indicated a right turn coming up, but he didn't see any exit ramps or turn-offs. He slowed, almost missing an unmarked dirt road. He made the turn, then drove another four miles—far enough into the desert that he lost sight of the highway in his rear-view. As the Range Rover bumped and lurched along the dirt road, he began to get a little nervous.

Before leaving his house and heading out on the highway, Jack did something he should have done all those years ago after Tinsel Town Cleaners cleaned up his mess. He read the terms of service on the back of their invoice. He was no lawyer, but having been in the entertainment industry for as long as he had and dealing with legions of attorneys with their endless flood of documents, he'd picked up the rhythm and gist of complex contracts. Most of the Cleaners' terms shored up an ironclad indemnification for themselves and—as expected—a draconian non-disclosure for him. Was it possible to be free of liability after cleaning up a murder site? Fuck if he knew, but there it was in black and white.

Other than that, the terms were vague and short on specifics, as if intentionally skirting details. Especially the conditions concerning payment of the Cleaners' fee. Jack got the sense that he was expected to read between the lines, which was the opposite of how contracts were supposed to work.

And again with the Latin. He'd translated some of it.

Duellum, he learned, is a contraction of *duo* (two) and *bellum* (war), which gave birth to the word “duel.”

Repeated throughout the service contract: *Code Duello*. That was

the name of a document from the 18th Century setting down rules for dueling. Duels, he learned, were once a socially accepted way of settling disagreements throughout Europe—as long as the duels followed the strict regulations outlined in the *Code Duello*. He'd tried reading the actual *Code Duello* (thanks PBS) but became bored when he failed to see how it applied to the services Tinsel Town Cleaners had provided. He hadn't offended anyone's honor (except those girls), and nobody had issued a challenge to him (thrown down the gauntlet, so to speak). The *Code Duello* set out rules concerning the selection of time and location, regulations about weapons that could or couldn't be used, procedures for making and accepting apologies, and decrees about what brought an end to a duel, such as severe injury, an intentional miss, or capitulation. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal, duels were usually not to the death. Duels, more often than not, were nothing more than grand-standing by prissy aristocratic assholes who were frightened by violence.

Jack didn't see how this applied to his situation—unless it was background for whatever performance he was expected to participate in.

As his mind wandered, though, he wondered if he was on his way to an actual duel.

If he was, that begged the question: *Against whom?*

Jack rolled to a stop, shut the engine off, and reached under the dash to thumb the button that opened the tailgate.

He swung his door open, and a hot wind hit him like a giant blow dryer. "Jesus."

He climbed from the driver's seat and took in the surrounding view of sand dunes and distant mountains. Shielding his eyes from the glare, he stretched his back and gathered his thoughts. *Not a lot of anything out here*, he thought as he walked to the rear of the Rover.

The duffel bag had shifted during the rough drive through the desert. Jack tugged it closer, unzipped it, and pulled out the axe. He

gave it a short one-handed heft, checking the balance and weight. Satisfied, he closed the tailgate and returned to the driver's door. He leaned the axe against the vehicle and reached in, snapping his phone from its mount and lifting a bottled water from the cup holder. He slid both items into the pockets of his loose-fitting pants, picked up the axe, and walked into the desert.

8

He was getting tired and had started dragging the head of the axe through the dirt, leaving a long, shallow scar in the barren landscape. *Man*, he thought. *This thing is heavier than I remember.*

Who organized this shit anyway? Was this always how it was—hiking to a remote and hellish location to face off against an unknown foe? Whether it was a real duel or a performance, had Hopper gone through this same bullshit? Had Brando? Had they both marched into this same desert, or had the Cleaners sent them to different locations? Jack rifled through his stack of notecard memories again, trying to recall the various locations his old friend had filmed. Had Hopper been compelled to trek into the deep forests of the Pacific Northwest? An abandoned coal mine in the south? The desert near Los Vegas? The endless tobacco fields of North Carolina? An abandoned warehouse in Detroit? The jungles of Vietnam? Did the Cleaners confine their services only to the continental United States? Jack and his fellow A-listers were globe-trotters supreme. *All the world's a stage*, Jack thought. *And it belongs to us.*

He tried to imagine big old Marlon Brando trudging around out here in the god-forsaken heat and sand. The man would've keeled over the moment he stepped from his vehicle. *I'm being cooked alive*, Jack thought. *But I bet I'm doing better than Brando would have.*

A slight constant breeze blew a small cloud of dust in front of Jack as he raised the head of the axe and rested the handle on his shoulder. *Brando. I could take him*, he thought.

And that's when it struck Jack that perhaps the opponent he was being pressed to meet (to duel?) was also a celebrity.

How did Brando die, anyway?

Jack began to suspect that he'd been a second-hand witness to the outcomes of whatever game he and his peers were unwitting contestants in. An overdose by a star known to be clean as a whistle. A mysterious drowning. A shocking revelation about an underlying health issue. Natural causes at a young age.

The price is steep. That's what Hopper told him. Jack had thought he meant cash. Maybe Hopper had been implying something else. Had celebrities who perished under odd circumstances lost their *duellum*? Had they paid for services rendered with their lives?

It sounded preposterous. A lunatic's conspiracy theory. Jack shook the thought from his mind and chalked it up to his overheated brain.

Jack stopped in the shade of a stony outcropping to catch his breath. The heat was getting to him, making him feel nauseous. He couldn't recall doing it, but at some point, he'd removed his shirt and wrapped it around his head like a turban to keep his dome from frying to a crisp. He still wore his suit jacket. He figured the white fabric would reflect heat, but it wasn't working. His bare belly protruded from the unbuttoned coat and was turning an angry shade of red.

He dragged a forearm across his sweaty brow and took a swig of water. He shook the plastic bottle a few times and saw it was nearly drained. He upended it, let the last few drops drip onto his parched tongue, then tossed the empty bottle away.

He jerked the Polaroid and the invoice from his breast pocket. He studied the photo. His stupid, peaceful face. *Idiot.*

He crumpled the paper items into a loose ball and let it drop to the ground at his feet. He reached into his pocket again and pulled out the wooden match the Cleaners had thoughtfully provided.

He was utterly alone in the middle of nowhere. The perfect place to (once again) get rid of evidence. He struck the match along the head of the axe and, cupping the flame with his free hand, bent low to torch the bundle of paper.

A gust of wind blew out the match.

OHFORFUCKSSAKE. Jack tossed the dead match away, gripped the axe with both hands, lifted high, and swung with all his strength into the paper knot. The head sliced through the paper and buried itself deep in the sand. Jack tugged it free and swung again.

Again and again, he hacked away at the evidence of his crime until all that remained were shreds.

He kicked the scraps away, scattering them in the wind.

He stood with legs spread wide, axe at the ready, breathing heavily. His face was red and dripping with sweat. *Godamn those Tinsel Town fuckers,* he thought, not sure if he was cursing them or himself.

A buzzing sound pulled Jack from his rage. He scanned the horizon, trying to locate the source of the strange noise that sounded like a giant mosquito.

A drone buzzed lazily into view, slowing as it settled into a hover high above. Even at a distance, Jack could see the drone carried a camera. The Cleaners making sure he kept his appointment, he guessed. He tossed off a salute, checked coordinates on his phone, then set off once again.

Jack crested a gently sloping rise. In the distance, through the shimmering heat haze, he spied a tall, thin figure walking straight toward him across a flat stretch of dry, cracked playa.

Let the show begin, Jack thought with a tight snort. He stopped walking and plunked the axe down next to his feet, leaning the handle against his leg. He slapped dust from his jacket lapels and tugged the sleeves, popping the cuffs. He unwound the grimy shirt from his head, wiped his sweaty face with it, then threw it to the ground. He combed his fingers through his hair, patted it flat, then lifted his arms to inspect his pits. Patches of sweat had formed a dark smudge down both sides of the coat and a wide “V” down the back.

He ran his leathery tongue around the inside of his parched mouth and felt grains of sand between his teeth. When he got home, he was going to stand in a cold shower forever.

As presentable as he was ever going to be, Jack picked up the axe, adjusted his grip, and began walking, eager to meet the person who was clearly his opponent.

“Who could it be?” Jack thought, squinting at the distant shape growing closer with every step. “Who would be stupid enough to traipse into this hell?” he muttered. *Me, that’s who.*

The figure was close enough now that Jack could tell it was a man. Whoever it was, Jack had to assume the guy had fucked up as bad as he had—bad enough to have to call the Cleaners and become beholden to them.

How was this supposed to work? What would he say? Jack still had no clue if this would be a real duel or a performance. He looked up to see if the drone was still following. It was, buzzing high above in a slow circle.

Jack hefted the axe and picked up his pace.

Finally, stopping ten paces from each other, Jack recognized his opponent. “I’ll be damned.”

Morgan Freeman.

Morgan was immaculate. Not a drop of sweat on him. He wore khaki slacks, loafers, and a handsome button-down shirt patterned with orange and brown paisley. He looked like he was heading to a casual lawn party rather than having just walked miles in the blistering heat.

Jack noticed Morgan’s hands were empty.

Out of breath, Jack still managed a chuckle. He looked from side to side, confirming they were alone, minus the drone. “Morgan,” he said. “Can’t say I expected you.”

“Hello, Jack,” Morgan said flatly.

“Listen, Morg. Look here, old man. How about you tell me what’s going on here, and then we--”

A hole the size of a pea opened up in Jack’s cheek just below his right eye as the crack of a revolver shattered the silence.

Jack stared at Morgan blankly. *How'd that gun get in his hand so fast?*

Jack's knees turned to rubber. He dropped the axe and fell, landing flat on his back.

The price is steep, both men thought. One man had this thought because he had just taken the high cost of a bullet to the face. The other man had this thought because taking the life of a (mostly) respected colleague was a terrible burden to bear.

Morgan squeezed two more rounds into Jack, one above his right eyebrow, the other to the right of his Adam's apple. "You were an ass, but I never disliked you, Jack," he said. "Unfortunately for you, I've got just as much to lose as you do. It's how things are, you understand?"

Morgan could tell by the glazed look in Jack's eyes that he, in fact, did not understand and never would.

Blood pooled around Jack's head and soaked into the sand. A dark stain appeared on the front of his pants. He gurgled a brief protest, then stopped breathing.

The drone swung in low. A dart launched from its undercarriage and stabbed into the ground near Jack's head. There was a sheet of paper rolled tightly around the dart's shaft, secured with rubber bands.

Morgan plucked the dart from the sand, snapped off the bands, and unrolled the paper. An invoice made out to him for five Executive Cleaning Packages, each accompanied by dates ranging from 1989 to this day, with a checkbox ticked for each one. At the bottom of the receipt, stamped in red ink:

PAID IN FULL

Morgan knelt and gently pressed Jack's eyelids shut. *Damn fool brought an axe to a gunfight*, he thought. "You had no idea what you signed up for, did you, you poor dumb bastard?" He wondered how they would rewrite Jack's death. Heart attack? Aneurysm? Cancer? The man's corpse was already bloating. It looked like a barbecued beached beluga. Smelled like one, too. Maybe they'd stage a fiery car crash.

Morgan squinted at the drone still hovering above. He didn't know who was watching, but he knew why they were watching and why they had recorded the *encounter* (Morgan had almost thought of it as a showdown but caught himself at the last moment. You couldn't call a duel a duel if one of the contestants was unaware that he was *in a contest*). Insurance. That's why the Cleaners were watching and recording. To ensure the duel was to the death, and the victor never spoke of it.

Years ago, Morgan had endeavored to discover who the mysterious Tinsel Town Cleaners were. He'd hired a handful of private investigators, each siloed from the other and tasked with examining only a small piece of the larger puzzle. The gumshoes were overly challenged and asked Morgan for additional information about their assignments—details he could not give lest he incriminate himself. And therein lay the problem: you couldn't discuss the Cleaners without revealing how you learned of their existence. The nature of their services guaranteed they would never be exposed.

The investigation had led nowhere, so Morgan called in a false alarm. When two burly men wearing disposable Tyvek coveralls showed up at his house, he grilled them with questions. They ignored him and, upon learning there was no need for their services, presented him with a bill anyway. One for which he paid dearly.

That was more than a decade ago. Morgan's left arm still bore scars from that *duellum*. And he missed his dear friend, Heath. Morgan had so enjoyed watching the young man grow into his talent and was looking forward to years of observing from afar as the boy's prodigious skills were brought to bear on an industry sorely in need of them. That he, Morgan, was the one to extinguish such a bright star was a cruel twist.

Morgan promised himself this *encounter* with Jack would be the last. Never again would he engage the services of Tinsel Town Cleaners. Nothing but the straight-and-narrow from here on out. Time to get busy living cleanly.

He folded the receipt and tucked it into his pocket along with the revolver. Then he walked back the way he came.

The drone buzzed away in the opposite direction.

10

Sheila sat in shocked silence, mouth agape, as the newswoman on her tablet repeated the breaking news that had interrupted the cooking show she'd been watching. "Tragic news this morning. Acting legend Jack Nicholson has passed away at the age of eighty-six, the victim of a deadly traffic accident involving an oil tanker."

The handsome anchorman sitting next to the woman continued, "The Hollywood icon will be remembered by friends and family at an upcoming service, the date of which has yet to be announced."

"Our thoughts and prayers are with his loved ones," said the woman.

The man shuffled papers, likely receiving a cue to vamp and extend the sequence for another fifteen seconds. "So tragic. Especially coming so soon after actor Kit Harington's passing." He turned to his co-anchor. "We should brace ourselves. You know what they say about celebrity deaths."

The woman nodded. "They always come in threes."

11

Two thousand miles away from Hollywood, near Nashville, Tennessee, Dolly Parton hums *I Will Always Love You* to her empty living room. She tightens the buckles of a double bandolier crisscrossing her signature assets. She runs her fingers down the belts, confirming that each loop holds a fresh shotgun shell. On her right hip hangs a sawed-off shotgun tucked into a fine leather

holster decorated with silver filigree. A Ka-Bar knife sits snugly in a sheath strapped to her left thigh.

Dolly Parton is armed to the teeth.

She stops humming and walks to the fireplace. She strikes a wooden match and gazes at the flame before dropping it into a cardboard shipping box she'd placed on the grate earlier. An invoice inside the box catches fire and curls into flames. The fire spreads to the rest of the box, blackening a broken Hummel figurine. A little German boy wearing knickers and carrying a straw basket. Where the boy's head should be, there is instead a razor-sharp porcelain edge stained brown with decades-old dried blood.

Outside the box, on the top left corner, the blue ink of a familiar logo darkens, then bursts into flames.

With a spring in her step, Dolly heads for the front door, singing now instead of humming. "I will always love yooooooooooooooooo."

She leaves, closing the door softly behind her.

Two thousand miles from Mrs. Parton, back in Los Angeles, a mail truck pulls away from a cozy bungalow at the end of a gated street as a serious-looking woman with cropped black hair and adult babysitter vibes steps from the front porch into the house carrying a small box. "Matt?" she calls out. "There's a package here for you."

A voice replies from down the hall. Soft vowels, hard consonants. Quintessential Texas. "Who's it from, dear?"

She squints at the label on the package. "Says Tinsel Town Cleaners."

The house is quiet for a moment, then the voice drawls, "Alright, alright, alright."

THE END