Chapter 1: He didn't have to think as he snipped the wires and capped them in one fluid motion. The alarms didn't have time to trigger. Painting and frame came off the wall easily after this was done. He could see a face in the glass of that frame. Flowing brown hair framed a nice face with small features and brown eyes. It was the face of a stranger that he had only just briefly met. He didn't know her name.

The frame fit nicely into his large black messenger bag. He hurried to the bathroom to go out the same window that he had shimmied in through, avoiding the line-of-sight of the cameras on the way. As he went to the window, he noted the beauty of the body he inhabited. It was lean with a bit of curve in the right places. A combination he enjoyed more in other situations but that proved more useful in this one. The black leggings and dark grey sweater dress she was wearing when they met suited his needs as much as her thin frame

He pushed the bag out first, holding on to the strap, and then climbed through the small bathroom window. When he got out in the tiny alley next to the museum his watch told him he was two minutes ahead of schedule. *Nailed it.* After walking three blocks up, he dropped the bag in a trashcan in front of a brownstone. New York City was used to odd happenings any time of day. Nobody would think twice about a nice looking girl throwing out a perfectly good messenger bag in the middle of the night. This was when he chose to leave the girl behind and get back to himself.

Jeremy's eyes opened in the bright fluorescent lighting of the emergency room at Mt. Sinai Medical Center. He did a good amount of work on the Upper East Side so he recognized this place. Not that there was an emergency room in New York that he wasn't acquainted with, but this one felt a little more like home than most of the others even though the cab fare to his apartment from here was about $20.

The saline being pumped into his left arm made his whole body cold. This was one thing he never got used to. He hated needles and sometimes passed out immediately upon waking and seeing a couple lines running into or out of his arms while the hospital staff did their best to figure out what was wrong with him.

There was constant activity beyond the curtains surrounding his bed. Voices talked about situations both trivial and dire. Feet went by at speeds that ranged from tortoise to hare. There was at least as much laughing as there was crying. He pressed the call button and waited.

When Matt walked in Jeremy smiled and let out a sigh.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite narcoleptic."

"How's it going, Matt? It's been a while."

"In this business three weeks isn't really a 'while' between visits. That makes you special."

"Lucky me."

Matt chuckled as he began looking over Jeremy's chart. He was a short brunette who went by Ginger on Saturday nights on a small stage in a bar in Chelsea. His shaggy brown hair was covered on those nights by a red wig and his green eyes were accentuated with false eyelashes, green eye shadow, and a healthy dose of eyeliner. Tonight, his green scrubs did the job of making his eyes pop.

"One of these days somebody will figure out what's wrong with you, cure it, and I'll lose my favorite patient."

"Well let's hope that never happens."

"I pray every day that it doesn't."

"You're too kind. Any clues in those papers?"

"Nope, just the usual. Hydrate and wait."

"Sounds very scientific."

"Wiseass. There's not much we can do with a patient in a coma. Nobody's even heard of anything where a person slips into so many short frequent comas."

"It's good to be an original."

"That's one way to look at it."

"How do you look at it?"

"I'm just happy when I see your name on our board and not in the obituaries."

"I appreciate that."

"You better."

Matt put the chart back down.

"How do you feel?"

"Rested."

"Great. You know we still have to keep you overnight for observation."

"I think you just like to keep me around as long as possible to torture me."

"The torture is a bonus, but mostly I just like to keep my job. Keeping you overnight keeps the doctors' insurance lower, which keeps them happy, which lets me keep being a nurse, which pays for all my habits."

"All of them?"

"Well, my liver pays for some of them, and my kidneys for others. But what good are your organs anyway if you don't give them an occasional workout?"

"Exactly."

"Alright, enough chit-chat. Get your pretty little head back to sleep. I'll be by in a couple hours to check on you again. Goodnight, Jeremy."

"Goodnight, Matt. See you soon." Matt laughed as he walked out and closed the curtain behind him. Jeremy had no trouble falling back to sleep in spite of his busy surroundings. When they woke him at 8:30 the next morning it was to start his discharge paperwork. He could fill the forms out on a cloudy, moonless night in the middle of the ocean. Doing it under the fluorescents was like cheating.

Walking through the front door to his apartment was always Jeremy's favorite moment after completing a job -- that and the moment later in the day when a pile of cash would arrive at a nearby drop point. This morning was no different. Jeremy let out a sigh as he stepped into his living room and tossed his keys on the coffee table. The room was small, fairly unadorned, but functional. A grey couch sat underneath a window on a wood floor, facing the huge TV on its black stand. Next to the couch was a wine fridge, fully stocked with fine wine and rare beer laid down for aging. Two feet from the couch and five from the TV was an average looking black coffee table. The coffee table held a few issues of Sports Illustrated, a coaster beneath an empty hi-ball glass, Jeremy's laptop, and, presently, his keys. Next to the TV stood an aquarium filled with salt water, rocks, coral, and three seahorses. The trio was yellow and barely noticeable from across the small room. White walls framed the entire space. The walls were broken up with posters. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig here, Spiderman there, and Superman held the place of prominence above the TV.

A breakfast bar with two black stools divided the living room from the tiny kitchen. A brick wall gave the kitchen charm in spite of being completely white otherwise. The numerous half-full bottles of liquor on top of the fridge allowed a little extra color to seep into this area as well. The hall that stretched beyond the three foot wide opening between fridge and stove had two doors on its left side. The first was the New York City sized bathroom and the second was the New York City sized closet. At the end of the hall was the bedroom doorway. The bedroom had a big window covered with a sheer grey curtain that opened to the fire escape. It also had a bed, a black nightstand with three grey drawers, and a small door that went to a closet only slightly larger than the one in the hall. This room was just as white as the rest, but the neatly made black and grey bedding played off that nicely.

Jeremy headed to the first door in the hall. Saline always went straight through him. Just as he finally exited, his phone started vibrating in his pocket. He took it out and saw the name "JJ" on the screen. He answered.

"What's up, JJ?"

The voice on the other end said, "Missed you last night. I had to take two girls home because you weren't around to clean up the leftovers."

"Rough life. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, just warn me next time I'm gonna have to take one for the team like that."

"Sure, I'll do that."

"You coming tonight?"

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Good. I don't think I could handle that much attention two nights in a row."

"You poor thing. We didn't settle into that bar for the beer list, after all. It's a target rich environment."

"I know, but when you aren't around there are about three rungs empty below me so I have to take on the tens down to the sixes instead of taking the tens and giving you the rest."

"I've never seen you pull a ten."

"What? I pull tens all the time, and you know it."

"Name one."

"Not fair."

"So describe one."

"Still not fair."

Jeremy laughed. "All the girls I've seen you take home have been drunk nines and tens, but that makes them sober sevens. Tops."

"But yours are drunk sixes."

"Not to my beer goggles."

"Alright, fair enough. I'll see you tonight, I have work to do or something."

"See you tonight, bye."

Jeremy hung up and looked at the clock on his phone. It was time to get paid. He walked a few blocks down to where he knew the ambulance would take just long enough to get to him that he would be back with himself. He didn't want to be back in the hospital again today. He had drinking to do tonight.

He found his mark walking toward him. Balding, portly, sweat stains, suspenders. The antithesis of the sleek and stylish creature he had inhabited for the job last night. Any trails trying to be clever by watching the job site and the cash drop spot would be horribly confused. He waved at the man.

"Don't I know you from," Jeremy began as the man looked at him sideways and Jeremy slipped a neatly folded black plastic bag into the man's pocket. Jeremy looked deep into the man's brown eyes then watched his own body slump to the ground on the street corner before moving on. He walked at a relaxed pace the few blocks further down and one block over to the trashcan that should have held his payment. It was there. Or at least a bag that was just as he requested was there. Maybe it was just somebody's trash, but he hadn't had that problem yet and this bag felt right.

He walked up a couple blocks and over one, and dropped a black bag in a trashcan around the middle of the block. He continued up to the trashcan in front of Jeremy's apartment and dropped the bag with the money there. Then he left the sweat-stained, balding man for his own young, fit body. He could hear the siren as he opened his eyes, but it was still a couple blocks away. He got up off of the ground and thanked the people who were standing around him. As he did, he looked into the grey eyes of a fit woman in her mid-forties. He watched his body slump once more as he threw her hands up in the air and excused himself claiming she had somewhere to be.

He walked the cougar the couple blocks down to the decoy bag. He reached in to the can and pulled out the bag and walked a few steps before leaving her to her own devices and opening his eyes to a paramedic crouching over him and checking his pulse.

"I'm fine."

"Sir, you were just unconscious. The people here say you woke up once and passed back out."

"I know, but I'm fine now. I don't need any help."

"Are you refusing medical assistance, sir?"

"Yes, do you need me to sign something?"

"Yes, in fact we do."

Jeremy filled out the refusal forms as he answered all the pertinent questions and then said goodbye and thank you to the paramedics. He walked to the trashcan in front of his apartment, claimed the bag of money from it, and went back inside with a smile on his face.

Chapter 2: Jeremy showered as soon as he got back to his apartment. He never could wait to get the hospital smell off of himself. The speakers had connected to his phone as he walked in and started playing his music as soon as he hit the power button on the remote. Nirvana was first up. They mumbled about teen spirit as Jeremy got in the shower and Pearl Jam followed them with an emotional song about still being alive. Jeremy got out of the shower to Motley Crue shouting at the devil. He threw on some gym shorts and poured himself a gin and tonic while Led Zeppelin sang about immigrants.

The rest of his evening at home was backed by everything from Dr. Dre to Garth Brooks to Chopin. The grunge and hard rock start was a coincidence that made random feel a little less so. He hadn't played an instrument since he dabbled in guitar as a young man, but he couldn't get enough music, no matter the style. Well, except maybe that electronic crap that had found its place at drug riddled festivals.

His Pad Thai with chicken and mock duck took about 40 minutes to arrive, but his book was keeping his attention well enough that he hardly noticed. He had yet to finish book one of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and he wanted to catch up, or get ahead, before *Game of Thrones* came back next spring. Only one piece of mock duck fell from his chopsticks and into the book as he read and ate. He felt this was a mild accomplishment. He had expected a stain on each page that lay open during his meal.

Time to head to the bar also arrived without any feeling of time elapsing. Jeremy put on his lucky jeans and a blue button down that made his eyes even more spectacular than usual and headed out. The walk down the stairs was almost as long as the one around the corner to the bar with the neon sign that read, "Dirty Lopez." JJ was already inside, nursing his scotch and leaning on the bar, as Jeremy stepped through the door. There were three attractive girls in their mid-twenties with varying shades of bottle blond hair sitting on stools a few spaces away from JJ. There were other people in the bar, including a regular who always sat in the corner booth and sipped iced tea, but JJ chose this spot for a reason.

"Hey, JJ."

"Hey, bud."

They grasped hands and commenced a bro hug, back patting and all.

"What number is that?" Jeremy nodded at the scotch.

"Two."

"Perfect, I had two at home while I read and ate."

"Nice. You still on book one?"

"Yeah. It's so good though. I'll finish it in the next couple days."

"It's crazy how many people are just now getting to that book. I feel like I read it a decade ago."

"Well, I think it's almost that old."

"I should have been an author. Can you imagine writing something and then suddenly getting crazy amounts of money from it ten years later?"

Jeremy let out a sarcastic snort as he took his glass away from his lips. "Yeah, you'd be so much better off."

"Money isn't everything."

"Right, it's the only thing."

"I've taught you well."

"I didn't need you to get to that conclusion, but you certainly have a way of reinforcing it. Besides, it's not like you've never waited for an investment to pay off before, right?"

"I suppose. But I don't have the patience for a decade. I need a quick payday or I'm out."

"That also explains why you never bed the same girl twice."

"Hey, I'm sure I've slept with a few girls twice. There can't be that many shameless girls out there willing to debase themselves by sleeping with me that I haven't had a few reruns. Especially with how long I've been at it."

"That's part of it though. The girls you went for a decade ago are not the same ones you go for now.

"They're in the same age group though."

"Yes, but they were in junior high when you started going after that age group."

"I can't decide whether that's gross or beautiful."

"Have a couple more. I'm sure you'll figure out the answer."

"Totally. Speaking of more," JJ looked to the bartender. "Gin and tonic for my friend, please. Squeeze the lime in, too. Thanks. And you may as well pour me another."

The blondes talked and each looked over at the guys at random intervals. The looks that they gave never involved more than inane curiosity. The guys looked at the girls even as they talked to one another. The targets for the evening were clearly established. Now it was time to establish contact. JJ led the way, as he always did. He stepped forward to the one with the lightest hair of the group. She also happened to be the closest to them. In addition, she was the one who looked over at them the most of the group. She was a sober 7. Her friends were a sober 8 and 8.5 in order of lighter to darker hair.

"Hi, I'm Jim. Couldn't help but notice you and your friends were due for a refill."

"Hi, Jim, I'm Angie. Yeah, I think we're ready for another round."

JJ looked to the bartender again. "Another round for the ladies, please."

"On your card?"

"Yes, of course."

"What's the name on that again?" The bartender winked at JJ as he played his part.

"Sanders. Jim Sanders."

"Right, thanks."

JJ looked back to Angie. "Do you come here often?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes?"

"I never thought anyone would really ask me that."

"Well?"

"You're persistent. I'll give you that. No, it's my first time here. My friend, Jenny, the one with the darker hair, has been here once. She liked the martinis so we decided to come tonight."

"Was she wrong?"

"No, the martinis are definitely worth having to admit we went to a place called Dirty Lopez."

"The name could be worse."

"True, but the reference is clear."

"True. Oh, I'm being rude. This is my friend, Jeremy."

"Nice to meet you, Jeremy, I'm Angie. These are my friends, Jessica and Jenny."

Jeremy shook each hand in sequence, ending next to Jenny, the 8.5 with the least blonde in her hair. "Nice to meet you all."

Angie rolled her eyes. "Well, the J names are officially at an annoying level."

JJ took a sip of his scotch. "Don't you feel like the odd man out, now?"

"I don't feel like a man at all."

"That's either good or bad news for me, depending on how I take it."

"How do you take it?"

"Touché. I prefer giving to receiving."

"Strange, I took you for a capitalist."

"Hmph. New York. A city full of socialist profit-haters that was built by the greed and avarice of generations of capitalist pigs." The air-quotes during "greed and avarice" made JJ's point clear. Angie smiled and blushed slightly. Jeremy talked to the two J-girls while JJ focused on Angie up until JJ paid the bill for the five of them and walked out the door with Angie holding his hand.

Jeremy had his arms around both girls. "Who's ready for another round?"

Jenny stood up. "I'm out. I have to be up too early tomorrow."

Jeremy took his arm off of Jenny. "Aww. Well it was nice to meet you, Jenny."

"Likewise. Get home safe, Jess."

Jess nodded emphatically. "Will do."

"Good night. Be good to my friend, Jeremy."

"Will do."

As Jenny walked out Jessica turned her head and leaned in for a kiss with Jeremy. It was a sloppy, drunken move that Jeremy was used to. "I've been waiting to do that all night. You live nearby?"

"I do. You wanna see my place?"

"Sure. Sounds fun."

"Yes, yes it does."

The two Js left the bar with their arms around each other and made the short walk to Jeremy's building. Jessica turned to face him as he got out his keys.

"I get the feeling I'm not the first girl to make this short walk with you."

"The first one that matters to you."

"You're so-funny." She kissed him again, sweetly and less sloppily this time. Still, Jeremy knew he didn't have much time before the clock on this fun drunk girl looking for a good time would run out and she would just be an unconscious lump. He quickly opened the exterior door and guided her up the stairs to his door. She kissed him again as he unlocked the door.

Once inside, Jessica kicked off her heels and Jeremy changed to the romantic playlist on his phone and hit the power button on the speakers. They were quickly lying on the couch in a hot and heavy bit of making out. Jessica's dress was soon pulled up over her head and tossed to the floor. It was an idea that they had at the same time and they executed together. Jeremy’s shirt flew up over his head, revealing a chiseled, athletic form and a barbed-wire tattoo on his right arm just below the shoulder. Her black bra, that matched her slightly see-through black panties, framed her breasts in such a way that Jeremy couldn't tell if she had paid for a good bra or some good surgery. It didn't take long. The bra was indeed good and it had been vaguely shielding equally impressive breasts. Maybe with such little work to do, it wasn't the bra after all. It was more a combination of genetics, diet, and exercise. She was definitely in shape. Her slim, smooth abs flared out at just the right spot, giving her an hourglass form that most women would have killed for. Jeremy revised his rating after she reached this state of undress. She was a 10. Maybe even a sober 9.5.

Then it was over. As fast as they had ripped off her dress she was lightly snoring as Jeremy kissed along her ribs. Jeremy stopped and looked at her cute, smiling, sleeping face. He frowned a little as he rested his head on her chest.

"Seriously? Again?"

Jeremy didn't mind taking advantage of drunken women. Unconscious ones were another story. Sometimes, though, trying to get the unconscious ones home turned into a fun game in and of itself. He shook Jessica to try to wake her. Nothing. He lightly ran his fingers down her side, causing goose bumps to form in the area. Her eyes opened.

"Where do you live? I want to get you home safely."

"Whuh? I'm notta home." Her eyes closed again. Jeremy shook her again. This time her eyelids shot apart.

"Tell me your address so I can get you home."

"Three-fourthy-one east sebendy-sex."

"Three forty one east seventy sixth?"

"Um hum." Jessica's eyes were rolling back and her eyelids were closing.

"Jessica!" Her eyelids took one quick leap open and Jeremy pushed in through her pretty hazel eyes. He pushed his unconscious body off of hers and let it slump on the couch. He hadn't seen everything he wanted to see yet. He went back to the bedroom, turned on the lights, and took a look in the full-length mirror on the wall. Her body did a 180 degree spin and he looked back to see what he wanted to see. He pulled her panties down to mid thigh and liked what was there. Not too big, not too small, round, and firm. From his lengthy experience with her he was certain that she wouldn't have minded him looking.

He couldn't resist. She was too much fun to look at. He pushed the panties off and kicked them to the corner. He grabbed his tripod and camera from his closet. He set them up so the full bed was visible in the shot and set the timer to go off every three seconds. He got on the bed and did every pose he could imagine that he would enjoy later. Then he got up and put the panties back on and did more of the same. Then he did it again with the good bra on. One hundred and eight pictures were on his camera by the time he put her dress back on. He took a few more seductive shots in that before taking the camera off of the tripod and connecting it to his laptop as he sat next to his limp body. A couple of the less revealing shots would eventually end up in a text message to JJ, but it was time to get Jessica home.

He grabbed a twenty out of his wallet, grabbed her purse, threw on her heels, and headed out the door. He hated heels. He had decided on numerous occasions that he needed to buy some women's flats for these very occasions. In spite of his decisiveness on this, he was always met with the roadblock of what size to get, and whether getting a range of sizes was really worth the money since he would most likely never get them back.

In the cab on the way uptown, Jeremy thought that this girl might be worth seeing again somewhere besides his computer screen so he looked through her purse, found a pen, and wrote his name and phone number on her hand. He was still not used to the fact that it was his handwriting that came out whenever he wrote with someone else's hand. Voices, on the other hand, were a physical thing and he was always surprised by the sound of the words he was saying when he spoke through the lips of another. When he told the cabbie where to go it was his accent and Jessica's voice that came out. The combination didn't seem quite right to Jeremy, but the cabbie couldn't care less about what accent this cute girl had.

When they arrived in the middle of Jessica's block, he handed the cabbie the twenty and stepped out of the cab. He could make out the 341 on the green awning above a flower shop. The wood and glass door to the left of the dark shop was clearly the entrance to the apartments above. He stepped up to it and found the keys in the bottom of Jessica's purse. There were at least eight keys on the ring.

"This is where I get off." As he opened his eyes on his couch he had to trust that she could get into her apartment from that point.

The photos had all finished loading onto his laptop. He hit the play button on the bottom of the screen and a slideshow began. He loaded a couple flirty but fully clothed shots to his phone and texted them to JJ. JJ's only response was, "Nice." He went through the slideshow twice before he was satisfied. This wasn't what he had in mind to finish off the night, but it would have to suffice.

Jeremy drifted off to sleep and found himself in Afghanistan. Carson Welt stood in front of him. He looked good. Much better than Jeremy's last memory of him. He was ready for a fight. Carson was explaining how they were going to take on the small force in the village below their position when Jeremy was suddenly looking at his own unconscious body. The rest of the squad stared at Carson, waiting for him to continue, until they realized Jeremy had passed out. They rushed to his aid as Jeremy woke up and Carson continued talking. Everyone but Carson looked around confused. Jeremy had just as little idea of what had happened as anyone else.