

A packed house waited beyond the dressing room door, down the abrupt hall, and past the indigo backdrop.

The host, the great, the venerable, the living legend, *the* Alan Finn, was warming the crowd with his opening monologue.

“Five minutes,” said Wendy Willis, his agent, manager, and lifelong confidant. She strummed her diamond rings against the door, twice, to produce a pair of sharp knocks.

What a farce this showbiz thing is, he thought. *It’s called the Night Show, but it’s being filmed at 10am.* In all fairness, that was far from the most deceitful practice in Hollywood. He too was guilty of selling false illusions.

The bulb-studded mirror was highlighting a blemish that the make-up girl had missed. There was also a nick on the back of his hand, just below his *Audemars Piguet* watch, which was poking out from his French-sleeved cuff and white gold cufflink. The undersides of his manicured nails were unappetizing. He should have gotten his nails done today, not yesterday afternoon.

He opened the door and poked his head out. Wendy was speaking to another client through her earpiece. She turned to him, questioningly.

“Can you send in... Rachel, I believe her name was? She missed a spot.” He pointed to the faint red of his recent wound, subtly permeating the cover-up.

Wendy told the client that she’d call them back in a moment and set off down the hall waving her arms, frantically calling for someone to help.

He went back into the dressing room, sat down in a hospitable folding chair, and stared at himself. The crowd applauded as the band transitioned them into a commercial break. They sounded excited, as though they’d been given a countdown to Christ’s return.

Wendy hurried the young woman into the room as though she was chasing a flightless bird from her stoop. The young woman had a cosmetic pouch attached to a belt loop around the waist of her black skirt. She was pretty in the LA tradition of being overtired and underpaid but still smiling like she was happy to be there. In LA, you age fast; whether it’s the smog or the sun or the drugs or the drink. The deciding factor is money. You either have it to hide your faults and prop up your most positive aspects or you don’t. Makeup hides, clothing manipulates, surgery both adds and removes, jewelry and cars and mansions blind.

Why is it, he thought, *that people who are supposedly experts in makeup look like clowns? Are they victims to the excesses of their own passions? Or do we all have something to hide, this being the aegis of the aesthetician?* Maybe she’d had to wake up early and had applied a thick enough coat to last the entire day. He stopped caring.

She attached a new bib around his neck and carefully removed a brush to apply a thin dusting of blush.

“What happened?” she asked. “It’s rather deep.” She nodded at the cut.

His cheeks relaxed and welcomed his lips as they eased into a smile. He began to drift into thought. *She was fun. She was also young and wore too much makeup for her job.*

"I do my own stunts," he said. "It can get... a little rough."

She unscrewed the lid of a compact and delicately rubbed an ointment between her thumb and palm. She glided it onto the spot. It stung in a pleasing way.

"That's so heroic," she cooed.

He flicked his lashes and looked at her. Her breath faltered, but her hands remained steady while studiously applying the cream. He obliged her professionalism by hemming courteously at her statement.

"This should..." she said, trailing off. Her lips quivered. He'd placed his hand on her knee and was moving it up past the hem of her dress. He felt her leg tremble. This was a dream for her, for any woman, and it was becoming real. His forefinger touched the fabric of her panties: soft, cotton, and dewing. *It was so easy.* He didn't even have to try. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had to put any effort into seduction. He nearly felt pity, swooning with such low-brow tactics and achieving success. They deserved better, or at least he did.

"Do it."

She finished.

"2 minutes!" Wendy exclaimed. "Girl, are you done? Do you still want to be working in this town tomorrow?"

She nodded but was unable to close her mouth.

"Rachel, right?" he asked. They loved it as much as he did when he remembered their names.

"Yes," she said after faintly stuttering an incomprehensible sound.

"Great work," he winked. "I'll see you later."

Wendy lunged and grabbed Rachel by the arm. She walked her to the door. Then, she quickly moved back and snatched the bib, which he was wiping his fingers off on, from his neck and crushed it hastily, tossing it in the bin.

"Look at you..." Wendy said.

His eyes rose to meet hers. He stood up while maintaining eye contact. "Yes?"

"No other client puts me through even half the shit you do, goddamn it."

He adjusted his tie in the mirror and turned his face to judge Rachel's work. He pulled his cuffs to his wrists and adjusted his watch. "No other client makes you half as much money. Combined." He did up the middle button of his navy suit jacket.

"We need you at position one, sir," said a backstage worker wearing a headset and holding script pages. She was trying to use her most professionally eloquent tone, fearing he might not return to the show if she was perceived as rude, even for an instant.

He kissed Wendy on the cheek, winked, and then turned on his heels. He followed the woman to his spot behind the curtain.

Wendy stood in the room alone and began to cry.

“Ladies and gentlemen in the audience, viewers at home and around the world...” Alan Finn was standing centre stage, not seated behind his desk as he normally would’ve been while introducing a guest.

“It’s the man that you’ve all been waiting for. He needs no introduction, but he’s getting one!”

The band’s drummer rifled on the snare.

“He’s just won Best Actor for the third time and is perhaps the world’s greatest talent, living or passed.”

The crowd clapped.

“His most recent film, *The Shadow Conspiracies*, has broken opening week box office records and is his 12th straight film to open at number one.”

The crowd clapped and whooped.

“He was voted the Most Beautiful Man of the Century and has been asked to pose for the great Italian sculptor Gianluigi Sirianni’s ground-breaking installation at the entrance of the Louvre in Paris.”

The female segments of the crowd became more boisterous.

“He was chosen as an official emissary to the United Nations summit that’s on the cusp of brokering peace between Israel and Palestine. His philanthropic pursuits are unquestionable! He also recently donated 7.8 million dollars to cancer research and another 10 million dollars to the International Women’s Fund.”

The crowd roared.

“Without further ado... It’s Time magazine’s four-time Man of the Year... The most magnetic, enigmatic, charismatic, and hard-working human being on the planet...”

He glanced side-long at the showrunner. She was looking at him through half-drawn eyes, as though he was a marvelous sunset reflecting against liquid metal waves: bright, but worth the strain. She pulled her clipboard into her chest and bit her lip.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jen,” she said as though she was no longer sure.

He nodded. “I’ll see you later.”

He was already fantasizing about what he’d do to her.

Alan was finishing his obnoxiously lengthy preamble, “...a self-made man who made it through early hardships, and a personal friend of mine. Let’s welcome back... Victor Lang!”

The drumroll, which had been slowly building, suddenly broke into a jazzier beat and the rest of the brass band joined in. A man to the left jerked on a rope and separated the ceiling-high drapes. A pair of spotlights became one as they seeped through the slit of the curtains with extravagant whiteness. The curtain holder yelled, *"I loved you in Great Ends! Good luck!"* It was evident that this was the best job he could've ever hoped for due to his slow delivery of non-spaced words with soft-edged consonants and simplistic candor. Victor figured that he'd ask for an autograph after.

Somehow, once his entire body was swallowed by the hot, white light, the crowd became even louder. He declined doing the simpleton's wave than his contemporaries often did. He smirked and nodded, always maintaining a sense of mystery and allure.

He met Alan and shook his hand. Alan pulled him in for a single-armed hug.

"Glad you came back, Vic. We'll be ok. You know what I have to do, but it'll be better for you in the end."

"Hello Al," Vic said. "Of course. I'll be fine. I never lose."

Alan Finn turned and raised Victor's arm towards the audience, the cameras, and the millions watching at home— in about 12 hours. They bowed and embraced again. If it were possible, the audience would've given him a levitating ovation instead of the standing one they had to settle for.

The band applauded as they walked to their seats. Victor gave them a nonchalant, military-style salute and they bowed in return. The saxophone player spread both of his hands and opened them like he was releasing a dove for peace.

The crowd refused to abate. Alan stood behind his desk and gestured his arm at Victor once more, who now took the opportunity to wave more like a Roman emperor would; a cessation rather than a greeting. The two men took their seats. The crowd rumbled on, swelling whenever a section began to reanimate, causing the rest to follow.

Victor stared into the crowd. Each and every one of them was his. They'd give their lives for him. He'd earned their admiration. He wanted their adulation. He wanted it all, because it was rightfully his.

Alan clasped his hands together, rocking his fists from side to side. He separated them and motioned to the audience with a pair of downturned palms, pleading them to calm down. Milder eruptions were still breaking loose, but the general tone had quieted down enough for Alan to begin.

Throughout the easily-digestible formalities, the crowd couldn't contain its boiling inquietude. In spite of Alan's pleas for silence, the audience simmered vociferously.

Alan was unable to get any questions out to Victor, who was, in turn, unable to provide any answers. Victor's mind began to wander. He looked at his hand, the scrape, and the reddish-brown flakes under his nails. Without thinking, he ran the thumbnail of his left hand beneath the index of his right. A mound of dirt accumulated on his thumb. He stealthily wiped it off on his seat cushion and patted his leg to complete his sleight of hand.

"Alright people, alright," Alan now had his arms extended with his palms facing the audience. "We're going to waste our time with Mr. Lang if you won't let me get a word out."

Victor was elsewhere. He was busy reliving the previous night. He was with the overly-dolled up prostitute that he'd picked up on Sunset Boulevard and driven to the bluffs. He'd been able to shake Wendy, his entourage, and his body guards and handlers after they'd finished supper with a famed director. He'd said that he wanted to clean up in his suite and preferred to be alone as it had been a busy day. He'd breached the fire escape, repelled down the emergency ladder that clung to the outside of the penthouse, and wound his way down to the street. He'd moved through the lobby, unseen by his guards near the elevator, and had asked the clerk to summon him a private car. *Yes, any car would do. Sure, even a Civic.* Once in the car, he'd begun his indentured choreography that was as well-rehearsed as his own date of birth. He'd driven to the row, chosen a woman who'd split away from the others, and sworn her to secrecy as she was entering the car.

"Oh my god, *the Victor Lang,*" she said.

They all said. Everyone.

"Can I get a dick-suck?" he asked.

Astounded and choking on her words, she replied: "Of course! Sweet Jesus, I'd pay you!"

He liked her. She was funny. She was wearing too much makeup, but this whore had character.

She said that her name was Trish.

He started driving out of the downtown core. She asked why. *He was Victor Lang, that was why. He wasn't about to be Eddie Murphy'd or Charlie Sheen'd like some two-bit comedian. He wasn't a star; he was a supernova.* That made sense to her. She bent two pieces of Wrigley's Double Mint against her tongue and chewed. *Peasant's gum. The flavour never lasts and it leaves the breath marshy.*

They arrived at a secluded area in the hills that overlooked the city lights— through the pollution. He parked the car. She chewed noisily. He looked all around. There wasn't any light except for that coming from downtown, muted by the haze. She was staring at him eagerly. He looked at his lap. She apologized and said that she was nervous.

"That's okay," he said, smiling warmly. Her gum was smacking in her mouth.

He lunged immediately and put his hands around her neck.

Trish was swinging her bright pink nails wildly. She tried to pry his hands from her neck— *the nick on his hand*— and then wheezed desperately as she clawed at his symmetrical face— *the scratch on his cheek*. He straightened his neck and kept his hands tight. He was at the breaking point. She was still fighting for breaths. When he was sure that she'd exhaled fully, he tightened his grip. He pushed his thumbs against her throat. She didn't have any oxygen left to gasp. Her eyes bulged and her body went limp.

He dragged Trish out of the car.

He studied the area, squinting and biting his lower lip. He remembered where he'd hidden it. A smile. Beneath a hastily dug hole, a foot from the surface, behind the third tree to the left, there was a shovel with its spade sharpened to a point.

He retrieved it and stood over the woman. He couldn't remember what *that one* even looked like, from less than half a day prior. Had she been white? Brown? What had her name been? Patricia? Pelegula?

He dropped the shovel on Trish's red-ravaged neck several times, until her head disconnected. He did the same thing to her knees, elbows, shoulders, and the area where the thighs meet the hips. He dug ten shallow graves, careful not to upturn any of the previous ones, and dropped a body part in each, patting the earth warmly like Johnny Appleseed. With the holes covered, he went to hide the shovel again.

"Paula!" he snapped. The last hooker's name had been Paula.

He bit his thumb in thought, looking around the little grove and spitting out the flecks of dirt beneath his nail. Various mounds of dirt were visible in the dim, tangerine light, like a giant mole had been attacked by a bout of insatiable curiosity.

He wiped off the shovel spade; fresh blood mixed with fresh earth layered on old blood and old earth.

"Sorry, old friend," he said to the shovel, holding the middle of its wooden handle. He threw it like a javelin over the cliff edge and whistled '*Here Comes the Sun*' back to the car.

"I beg your pardon?" Victor said. The crowd laughed.

Alan forced a chuckle and repeated his statement. "I said, you must be very proud of your work."

"Always," Victor responded. He clasped his fingers with his elbows on the arm rests.

"So many accomplishments. And, so young! Only... 35?"

"That's right. Almost 36, though."

"Still young," grinned Alan, in his early sixties. "What's your greatest achievement? In your view, of course."

Victor's mind flashed. He made a thinking noise for the outside world.

In his own mind, he cycled through the murders. The hookers, the groupies, the interns, the hang-arounds, the starlets, the hobos, the waiters and waitresses...

"There are just so many," he said. "I have to believe that my best work has yet to be done, Al."

"Good answer!" Alan clapped lightly and the crowd followed. "We have to cut to commercial, but we'll be back with the great Victor Lang shortly," Alan said to the camera as the band began to play.

"I have to piss, Vic," Alan said, patting his shoulder as the camera light went red. He pushed himself out from his desk and jogged to the stage wing.

Really though, Victor mused, what was my greatest murder?

Had it been the French songbird Elise Chateaubriand, who he'd murdered in Switzerland on a ski trip and said that she'd gone missing? Had it been the famed political journalist Indira Baal, who he'd killed when they'd been doing volunteer work in the Congo? A grenade, he recalled, had been as great a scapegoat as the Alpine back-country. Had it been the aspiring actress who he'd stabbed 47 times in her trailer and said that he'd 'found' her with a note from a jealous ex-boyfriend written with his left hand? Or the late-

*great Walter C. Montgomery who he'd concussed with his own lifetime achievement award and rolled into his own Olympic-sized pool in Malibu? He shouldn't have been swimming at 83 years old- so the coroner had said- let alone diving into the shallow end. Then, there had been all the insignificant people who'd never be missed. The bulbous-nosed vagrant, whose eyes had one day had the pleasure of meeting the most handsome thumbs on the planet outside a Bucharest train station while he'd been filming his award-winning film *The Romani Jungle*? The Quebecois busker who he'd invited into his limousine while he was freezing on Saint-Laurent in mid-January? His closest childhood friend who he'd held underwater a smidge too long in the lake, even though he'd noticed that no bubbles had been coming to the surface? Had his first been his best?*

Victor started to beat the drum solo from '*In the Air Tonight*' on his knees as Alan returned, congratulating himself on his exceptionally quick piss break, even with his prostate acting up.

"I'm going to lob you some soft balls," Alan leaned in and said as the director started the ten second count down. "Romances, charity shit, you know... easy stuff."

Victor nodded.

The crowd began to applaud as the red light on the camera went green. "We're back with Victor Lang!" Alan announced.

"I wanted to ask, Vic... You're a notorious bachelor. Though you've had some wild flings in the past with actresses and models and are regularly mentioned in the gossip sheets as having dated almost every beautiful woman in Hollywood... Are you still single? Is that intentional?"

Victor leaned back in his chair.

"It's not on purpose, Alan. I really do believe that love is sacred and that there's a special woman out there for me. I still miss my poor... exes," The crowd made a sympathetic noise in unison, "But it may be that I'm just busy. I don't expect a woman to change her life or schedule for me. People have their own ambitions. I'd feel guilty if a woman had to turn her life upside down for little old me. My problem..." He thought briefly about pushing a butcher's knife through a former lover, a costume designer from his film *The Great Pip Calhoun and his Extravagant Peacock Overcoat*, a children's movie, "...is that I just don't have much time. And, virtually all of my contemporaries are just as busy."

Busy. Not to mention the fact that he'd had some *too close* calls when he'd slain famous women. The innocent boyfriend routine, even from the greatest actor alive, would wear thin if he killed another well-known artist.

"There was also the unfortunate death of your fiancée, Daisy Sweeney, during a brutal home invasion that left you hospitalized."

"Yes, that's a hole in my heart, my soul, that could never and will never be filled," Victor said. He still had a scar from the blade that he'd put through his own body. *That, her, Daisy... that had been an accident.* It had been more of a crime of passion than a calculated strike. She'd found out about the murder of their dog walker, Francis, a lovely young man with a lisp and a love for dogs unlike any he'd seen before. Rather, she'd figured it out. Miss Sweeney had been keen and highly intelligent. He'd loved her as an equal. Still, Daisy had had to go. He hadn't wanted her to, not then at least, but it had been necessary, in the kitchen of their New York apartment, then and there.

"I still have a hard time being in New York," he said. "It's not the same without Daze."

The crowd made more sympathetic noises.

"My friends," Alan addressed the crowd, "I've known Vic since he was a child. Even though he's been blessed with so many natural talents and has nurtured them to astounding heights, it's worth mentioning that he's had a difficult life filled with many obstacles. Coming from poverty and having virtually nothing in the Appalachians with only his mother to raise him and his 5 siblings, to being chosen, almost by God's hand, to star in one of the greatest ever children's shows... *The Lucky Larry Hour*. It makes his journey seem all the more heroic." The crowd cheered for the beloved children's program. "While you may see a striking, talented, and generous man sitting to my right, he's as humble as his roots. What you may not be aware of are the depths out of which this respected gentleman had to climb to get to where he is today."

The crowd clapped. Heartily. Warmly. Earnestly. With genuine affection. It made Victor's face relax, his lips widen, and his eyes soften. He bowed his head and curled his lips slightly towards his teeth.

"You know, Alan..." Victor began, "...if not for the poverty, the loss of my father, and all the other struggles of my childhood, I don't know if it would be possible for me to feel so... *thankful*. I feel so blessed by my fans and supporters, God, and all those who have always stood by my side."

Victor had, in all reality, butchered God and drunk his blood long ago.

"Judge a man not based on where he's been, but where he's going. I want to be living proof for all those dwelling in misery: dreams can come true, change is possible, and, with a little luck, anyone can accomplish what I have. I believe that a person isn't who they are based on their successes, but based on how they handle their defeats. How they rise to the occasion. How they overcome the odds and any opposing forces that try to stop them from reaching their goals. It's a travesty that bad things happen to good people, awful and evil things. But, in the face of doubt and fear, that's when we show what we're made of."

The crowd exploded with approval, standing to smash their hands together like marching band cymbals, cupping their hands around their mouths to scream. Victor glanced backstage. Wendy was patting two fingers into her palm like a wealthy dowager at the peak of ecstasy. The showrunner was holding her clipboard tightly and nodding vigorously with tears falling from her eyes. Rachel, the makeup woman, was equally touched. Globes of mascara were melting the bronzer from her face.

Victor shifted in his seat. His penis had become partially stiff. The admiration, the lack of emotional control, the potential victims that would line up outside his dressing room without the faintest idea of what would happen when he invited them to his suite for a glass of wine and a bout of hero-worship...

"Wow!" Alan was clapping as well, "You're a true inspiration!" He turned to the audience. "His words are only matched by his charity." Alan turned back to Victor. "Your donation to the *Housing Society of Baltimore* has allowed for the increased building of social housing and..."

Victor braced himself for a slew of benevolent words. He basked in them like sunshine as he recalled the episode in Baltimore. He'd gone to the housing projects that he'd later help finance the rebuilding of incognito while filming his gritty, crooked-cop drama *Rogue Blue*.

He'd had a good morning. Following a late-night shoot at the Inner Harbour and a pre-first-light breakfast at a blue-collar restaurant with his co-stars, Victor had stayed in costume, using the excuse of staying in character. He'd taken the realistically-adorned Crown Victoria to the Westside of town. He'd chosen a building, a floor number, and an apartment at random and had summoned the occupant. *'It's the police! There was an attack last night and we're just asking some questions...'* or something to that effect. The morning was only just cracking its knuckles. He'd been buzzed in and had proceeded to the fourth floor of the ten-floor building. A woman, late-thirties to early-forties, had let him in. Her name had been Rosa; he liked it when he remembered their names. He'd written it in his prop notepad with his prop pen. She'd been living alone; working as a maid but turning tricks at night. She'd heard about the spike of attacks happening in the area. In poor areas, there are endless spikes in various crimes. Victor had guessed right and lucked out. She'd been heavier-set with unkempt curls from slumber. She'd asked if he was a real police officer or *the* Victor Lang. If he wasn't, he was a dead-ringer. She'd then been pistol-whipped with a prop-gun. He'd forced her to the bedroom and handcuffed her to her headboard. He'd shoved a sock in her mouth and tied a stocking around her head to keep her quiet. She'd been assaulted and maimed on her own bed.

Victor, while still naked, had heated some water and stirred a spoonful of instant coffee grounds into a mug. He'd sat down on the corner of the bed beside a window where a packet of cigarettes and a book of matches were sitting. The sun was unrolling its arms and touching the faces of the nearby apartments. The light was animating the steam from his coffee and the wisps of battleship-gray smoke from one of Rosa's Pall Malls. He sighed as he looked from the blood on the cigarette filter to the red creases on his palms and fingers. He sighed again at the mess he'd made, and the evidence that he'd have to deal with.

He'd gotten carried away with that one and let himself go.

He'd spot-washed, gotten dressed and given his hands a thorough wash in the kitchen sink. There had been a ring of grime three-quarters up the side where Rosa must've filled it with water to wash dishes. He'd turned on all four of the elements on the gas stove. A ticking had been joined by a smell like sulfur as the elements became aroused. He'd plucked three matches and scraped them to conjure a flame. He'd placed Rosa's comforter on the stove and watched it succumb to fire. He'd lit her dishtowel on fire and her couch cushions, throwing them around the apartment. He hadn't been sure that the small fires would get the job done. He'd lit a rolled newspaper on fire and carried it around like a torch, setting fire to her bed. By the time the paper had burned close to his skin, singeing the hairs on his right hand, he'd been satisfied with the fully engulfed mattress. He'd closed the windows and ripped the smoke detector from the ceiling above the front door. Finally, he'd left. He would've given the same treatment to the smoke detector in the hallway, but it had been nothing but a divot filled with loose wires.

He'd pushed the fire exit open and had rounded the first set of stairs briskly while whistling *Wouldn't It Be Nice* by the Beach Boys.

He'd met an old man on the next flight, struggling to yard himself up the stairs using the railing. The old man had started to say something, seemingly cheery. Victor, whistling the second chorus, had splayed his palm and had placed it on the old man's bald head. Victor had then found himself racing the backwards summersaulting body of the old man to the landing. The man had barrelled into the wall and hadn't made any sounds or movements. Victor hadn't looked back. He'd proceeded around the bend,

down two more flights, and had landed back on the street, into his car, into to his suite, into the shower, onto the bed, and into his dream world.

The next day, he'd read the morning paper while whistling the same tune. It had said that a tenement had been razed by flames leaving 37 dead and 62 more displaced. Victor had then announced that he'd be donating half of his earnings from *Rogue Blue* to the *Housing Society of Baltimore*. The film had opened at number one and eventually earned him his second Best Actor award.

"...I could go on and on... but I've already gone on for a while," Alan said. The crowd was oohing and ahing at the tens of millions that Victor had given away to a myriad of foundations and charities. "Vic," Alan turned to him, "is it your upbringing that blessed you with such a giving spirit?"

"If you have, you should give," Victor said. "I just have more, so I give more. I don't do it without seeing anything in return. I love seeing my donations being used to better the lives of others. You know what they say: *You can't take it with you*. I'm rewarded by the feeling I get when someone comes up to me and says that their grandmother's still alive thanks to money I donated, or that a child's life changed for the better."

Victor *was* telling the truth. He didn't donate out of guilt. It was paramount for him to keep smiles on people's faces and loving admiration for him in their minds and hearts. This was because if Victor was to ever be fingered again for a disappearance, rape, assault, or murder, he had to be sure that his adoring millions, of all ages, genders, and races, would immediately seek to prop him up against such revolting accusations. They'd cry afoul, as they'd done before, with cries of framing, evidence tampering, and slander that would render the authorities embarrassed and the victims as pariahs and outcasts.

One such person, a very young stagehand from Victor's early days, before he'd sewn himself so deeply in the fabric of the public's hearts, had experienced that first hand.

He'd gone to the police, saying that he'd woken up mid-assault, and had accused the up-and-coming Victor Lang of drugging him, raping him and, had he not woken up in time to find a lumberjack's axe being held like a carnival mallet over his head, attempting to decapitate and murder him. He'd rolled away just in time. The stagehand had fled from the room, according to his report, unaware that he'd still been in the studio, and had continued running until he'd come upon a guard on the lot.

This had all happened a very long time ago and was far from the only allegation Victor would be confronted with throughout his career. It had been a learning experience, a moment when he'd been taught a great lesson about people. *An epiphany of sorts for the young Victor Lang*. Though times had been different well over a decade ago, Victor had successfully denied everything. He'd denied passionately, maintained his innocence, and, with help from Wendy and her team of story-spinners and dog-waggers, destroyed the young stagehand, both his career and his character. He'd hung himself at home after having been told to leave the set.

More important than the insistence of his innocence, the suppression of the truth, and the alternate story that he and his team had been proffering, was the fact that Victor had been pumping out a virtuoso performance; virtuosity, one after the next. Some people hadn't been entirely swayed by his team's antics but they'd been pacified after a succession of five-star films and awards. *Hypnotized might be a better word*. People had been admiring the pocket-watch gliding back-and-forth in his left hand, leaving his right to explore the darkness below.

“Look at him...” Alan said, waving his cue cards. His head was resting on his hand with a dreamy smile. “Mr. Lang is probably imagining the thousands, maybe more, that he’s helped.”

Victor must have only been glazed-over by his recollections for a second. He’d moved on from the stagehand- from whom he’d also learned the lesson to always *overdose*, rather than *underdose*- to an adorable little extra from his movie *Ground Scraper*. She’d been a very beautiful girl with a big head and small body who he’d chosen to practice his Segal-like neck-breaking on, like he’d pretended to do in the movie. It’d taken a few tries, but eventually, he’d gotten the technique down. Good enough for a split-second effort in the ski hills.

“I...” Victor began. His face hardened and his smirk was fiendish. “I was just thinking about how hard it is to twist off another human being’s head. Like in the action movies. It’s... actually really difficult. Even with a 90-pound woman with 10 pounds of head. Necks... they’re resilient. Don’t believe everything you see in the movies, kids. And, don’t try anything you see at home.”

The crowd erupted. Alan, who was giving Victor a stunned look, followed his audience’s lead. “How random are actors nowadays?” He tapped his cue cards against the desk and cleared his throat to let out another chuckle. “It’s that sense of humour, that creativity, that keeps us all entertained.”

Victor’s face softened and his shoulders relaxed. He melted back into the seat and glanced over at Wendy. Her no-nonsense eyebrows were lifted like a drawbridge. Her mouth was open, not loosely hinged with surprise, but jutted out and tensed. He winked and turned back.

Look at them, he thought to himself. *I’ve just confessed to a murder, and they love it. They’re eating it up. They love me. They loved me when Elise died, when Lucky Larry died... I could kill them, bring them back to testify regarding the events, and even then, they wouldn’t turn on me. I can do whatever I want.*

“And with that,” Alan Finn said, “we must pause for commercial again.” He made an exaggerated pout and let the crowd voice their displeasure. “But, don’t worry! We’ll be back with Victor Lang after a word from our sponsors.”

The band played them out.

“Jesus, Vic. You can get away with murder, can’t you? Please, do me a favour and don’t drop an f-bomb or anything. I know that look.”

“Of course not, Al!” Victor said. In his younger years, he might’ve enjoyed bating controversy, just as any person with too much money and looks is prone to do while feasting on the spotlight. However, he was responsible now. He had a lot to lose, not that he believed that he could.

A woman with a headset ran up to Alan, handed him a stack of papers, and whispered something to him.

“*Jesum Crow, Vic!*” Alan slapped his hand on the table. “Our projected Nielsen rating will be through the roof! We’ll have millions of viewers! Vic, we’re gonna do Super Bowl numbers!”

“I’m happy for you,” Victor responded. He gazed into the audience like it was a crab tank.

“Us! This is for us!” Alan said. Victor shrugged. “Listen Vic,” Alan’s tone dropped considerably, “I can’t keep sucking your stem here. I have to address the movement and what they’re saying about you. I

mean, that's why you're here, right? Not just to promote a movie, which will obviously do gang-busters with or without the show, but..."

"Yeah, yeah, Al," Victor responded, waving his hand. "Wendy told me. I can read the paper and affidavits. Do your worst."

Alan wrenched his eyes. "The innocent have nothing to fear, do they?"

The left corner of Victor's lip started dragging towards his ear and he thought about the full set of adult teeth he'd dropped through a sewage grate like change in a bum's cup earlier that morning. "Bingo, my friend."

Alan announced their return to air with a hand flourish meant to silence the band like a musical conductor, his cue cards holding the place of the maestro's wand.

"Vic," Alan began once the bubbling crowd quelled to rolling murmurs, "I have to bring this up... They'd revoke my journalistic license and drag me through the streets if I didn't. It's elephant in the room. The single dark cloud in your otherwise brilliant blue sky."

A hush fell upon the crowd. They weren't silent; they were whispering and jeering at the host quietly. Many were occupying the edges of their seats. Restless. Nervous. What would their hero say?

Victor acquiesced with a solemn nod. Tackling the subject and the prospect of clearing his name almost made him feel giddy. Wendy had tried to coach him to handle the questions tactfully and self-servingly. The witch-hunt, as she'd described it, along with the changing social landscape, meant that Victor was no longer being given amnesty, that he may no longer be untouchable. Big men, famous and celebrated men, had been dragged over the embers. *Rightfully so, the disgusting perverts*. Their skeletons had been exhumed from their closets and had resulted in their black-listings and lengthy incarcerations. Victor, having actual skeletons buried all over his estate, argued with her: *'Yes, but they were hacks. Sloppy hacks who failed to earn as much respect as they thought they had. They were fine men and decent talents, but I am great.'* He was confident, waving his agent away and telling her that he had this in the bag.

Alan adopted a grimness unbeknownst to his long-tenured audience. "Vic, you've been accused of sexual harassment, misconduct, and even assault by several women over the span of your career. The first woman to come forth, Ibrahima de los Santos, your co-star in the Moorish Spain era love story *Por qué no?* said that you invited her to your house and proceeded to force yourself upon her." The crowd gasped and some booed. "Others have also come forward describing similar situations, occurring at your estate or on set." Alan paused.

Victor nodded despondently with his eyes pointed down.

"Well, Vic..." Alan finally broke the silence, "What do you have to say?"

Wendy had already taken out her earpiece and had placed it with her papers on a nearby bench. Her hands were clasped with her shoulders pushed forward.

The audience was now completely silent. It was unclear whether they were still breathing or blinking.

The band, the cameramen, the backstage personnel, the cue card holders... everyone. It was as though all their eyelids had been eradicated.

“Well, Al...” Victor was controlling his insatiable desire to smirk, “I’d like to start off by saying that all these accusations are false. Completely and utterly created as a ploy to destroy my good name and tarnish the legacy that I’ve built. It’s a smear campaign. By who? I don’t know, and I don’t wish to empower those evil and sinister folks with any kind of investigation. The truth is, these accusations aren’t new. *Not even close*. I’ve been dealing with this kind of libellous, jealous bull... *garbage* throughout my entire career. Since Lucky Larry even, if you recall.”

Though that was a long time ago, it had been a scandal that had rocked Hollywood to the core. Victor had been accused of fondling his equally young female co-star under the negligent eye of the main star, Lucky Larry. Victor had been young, but still clever in his youth. He’d said that Larry had forced the two pre-teens to engage in sexual acts. Prior to making his tear-filled announcement about Larry’s debauched involvement in the matter to a ring of reporters outside the studio, flanked by his mother and Wendy, he’d slipped some penicillin into Larry’s bottle of rye that he always kept in his dressing room. He’d done this prior to Larry arriving on set, knowing that he was both an alcoholic and vastly allergic to antibiotics. When he’d checked on Larry, he’d found him struggling to breathe. He’d smiled and locked the door from the inside. Everyone had thought that the suicide has arisen from the guilty conscience of an alleged pedophile. A few years later, Victor had apologized to the girl, then a woman, now a hundred pieces of long-rotten flesh and bone sprinkled throughout the garden of his Beverly Hills estate.

“Yes, the Lucky Larry incident was... a travesty. Poor children,” Alan said. The crowd sounded sympathetic.

“But...” Victor sat up resolutely, “I wasn’t at fault then, and I’m not now. I can explain in great detail how Miss De Los Santos and I were romantically involved. Her molestation claims are entirely the work of a jaded ex-lover. I can explain other claims as being chalked up to similar situations, and still more that are completely fictitious portrayals invented by liars who want to take me down and extort money. No, I’ve allowed these claims to be made public because I have nothing to fear or hide. I apologize to my exes for what may have seemed like sudden changes of heart; relationships aren’t hostage situations and I didn’t wish to be trapped purely to advance the careers of women who were more interested in my fame than me. I’ve been the victim of jealous backlash due to statements like these and see all the recent controversy as mental and emotional violence coming from my former lovers. Regarding the rest, I hate to say it, but they’re trying to cash in. I have alibis. I have stories and witnesses that can attest to the *real* truth.”

The crowd wanted to believe Victor Lang. They wanted him to be freed from the scandals that were enveloping him.

“I know that my fans, the millions and millions of supporters that have joined me on my journey, believe me. I know they do. I can prove this by pointing out that my art, my work, has not suffered. Nor has the viewership. Nor have the letters of support and love that I receive every day by the truck load. Regarding the men who are in the same boat as me, the evidence lies in their fear of being in public; their work has been impacted and their attitudes speak for themselves. I, on the other hand, have never once given any serious thought to this preposterous slander. I’ve continued to live my life in the face of

all this ugliness... for them.” He gestured to the crowd. “I do it all for you. My fans, my supporters, the people that love me and who I love in return. I just want to take the time to say, you all mean so much to me. I wouldn’t be here without you. I wouldn’t have the strength or desire to carry on without you.”

“Wow,” Alan clapped. The audience cheered. Victor could see tears sparkling down their cheeks.

They bought it, he thought. He bought it, they bought it, everyone bought it! Shit, I’d buy it. Best actor alive. I am king! He glanced at Wendy. Her lips were tight and water was accumulating in the corners of her eyes. The bawling stagehand and the equally emotion Rachel were standing beside her. He winked.

Victor scratched his chin. “I want to add...” He raised his hand and the audience immediately quieted, “It’s not the fault of these women. I don’t blame them. Keep in mind, none of the allegation-slingers have taken any legal action. Granted, attempts to extort me have been done in secrecy. I will not, however, take measures to counter-sue anyone. The world requires people, women and men, to avoid pettiness. We must move on from those who offend and slight us and focus on more important things, like the environment. *Things that impact us all.* I suppose I just want to say... I’m sorry that things have gotten this far. I also forgive anyone who has said or done anything against me. *All of you.*”

The audience shot to their feet. They clapped until their palms were purple.

Alan leaned back in his seat. His face glowed with admiration. He rocked his head back and forth slowly and slightly.

Yup. Victor now allowed himself to relax his brow and beam. *Just as it was supposed to go. Just as I knew it would. And they thought that they could take me down. Me? Never. I’m untouchable. Let the clowns apologize and get punished. I won’t go down that road.*

“So... what you’re saying is... you’re innocent?” Alan lightened the room. “Your conscience is clear and you deny all allegations laid against you?”

“Infinite times over, yes.” Victor allowed his lips and eyebrows to quiver.

He felt bulletproof.

“Truthfully, why would I?” he continued. “I’m not bragging, but I’ve never had difficulty meeting women. If I have a problem, it’s that I share too much of my heart too easily. I open myself up so widely and deeply, and encourage others to do the same. I always connect with people passionately, even if it’s just for a fleeting moment. I hate it when any of my relationships end, but that’s the nature of the beast. I’m here today and gone tomorrow. My true passions are the stage, the screen... and the fulfillment of my pledge to my fans and audience. I’ve never been able to put another human being on the same pedestal as my art.”

“Well,” Alan said, “you sacrifice. You sacrifice your happiness for us.” He turned to the camera. “See, folks? Even a man like Victor Lang has unfulfilled wants and desires. He may live in a mega-mansion, own dozens of luxury cars, and date the most beautiful women in the world, but no one’s life is perfect. Thank you for your honesty, Vic.”

The crowd was in the palm of his hand. He felt like squeezing.

“Life and love are about honesty.” Victor’s eyes narrowed and his lips widened. He was getting cocky. “I’m an actor, but not a liar. I find my greatest inspiration in real life. Look... to be honest, I’m a serial killer.”

The crowd snickered. Alan let out a single guttural laugh and ducked his head to cover the baring of his teeth.

“The things that I’ve done... Well, they’d make Bundy, Gacy, and all those other shmucks look like altar boys. Except Dahmer. I wouldn’t sully my physique and spoil my diet with human flesh.”

“That’s... that’s a little grim,” Alan stuttered, making a pushing gesture with his shoulders in retreat.

“That mega-mansion in Beverly Hills? My estate? Riddled with bones and teeth. My flowers grow like prehistoric fauna, and I think you can all guess why. My basement’s entirely devoted to torture. You should see it! I have a surgeon’s playset and more knives than I do awards, all polished and razor-sharp. I’ve murdered in almost every room in the house. You have to have goals, Al. It’s something that I really enjoy, something that has no substitute or rival in the world. The rush, the exhilaration, the look of peril and loss in someone’s eyes at the moment of their death...” He trailed off, finishing with a chef’s kiss to his fingers.

The sharp sound of Wendy screaming obscenities off-stage leaked onto the set. The crowd was laughing nervously, unsure of the words he’d delivered with the pleasantly affable tone of a front desk clerk.

“Is... is this a movie or something?” Alan asked. His face was folding into itself, just like a man trying to make out a train station announcement. “Are... are you doing a bit?”

Victor’s face had curled and twisted. He held his expression for a moment, then unsnarled his lip and let his eyebrows smooth back. “*Of course!* My next film’s called *Murder at Gresham Manor*. I’ll be playing a 90-year-old serial killer *and* the young reporter tasked with uncovering the truth!”

Now he had to have that script made.

“Marvelous!” Alan exclaimed, pulling at his shirt collar. “I *almost* bought that! I can’t... *we* can’t wait for your next performance.” He stood and clapped. The audience stood and clapped. Alan grabbed Victor’s hand, led him to his feet, and walked him to centre stage. They bowed. Alan raised Victor’s arm above his head as if he were a victorious boxer. Victor kissed his palm and waved his arm. He bowed again.

There was one audience member who hadn’t stood up. A man. He was sitting sullenly while those around him were experiencing a quasi-religious veneration for their champion. It was as though the Beatles were arriving to the shores of America and he was leaning against his car smoking a cigarette in the parking lot.

Victor started shaking hands with the front row after the cameras had stopped rolling. He waved, smiled, and posed for pictures. Alan approached him from behind after five minutes and led him to the wing.

“Jesus, you really had them. I had no idea how that would go. They really love you. They *wanted* to believe you. That really could’ve gone belly up,” Alan whispered to Victor as they walked backstage to meet Wendy.

Wendy was standing beside Rachel and the stagehand. Rachel was sporting a fresh coat of paint. Wendy lunged forward and grabbed his arm. She thanked Alan and hustled Victor to the dressing room.

“What the hell was that? What are you trying to do? Are you so arrogant... such... such as narcissist that...”

Victor shrugged her arm off of his. “I told you. I killed this, didn’t I?”

She stammered, but said nothing.

“You wanted me to own up to things that I didn’t even do. And, you were wrong. Again.”

“Victor, it’s not that I don’t think you could... That is to say, I knew you could get yourself out from under the controversy. But... you have to be careful.”

They arrived at the dressing room door.

“You know what, Wendy? Maybe you’re losing your edge.” She was taken aback. “Maybe you’re getting too soft for the game and should focus on your teeny-boppers and child actors. Something a little easier.”

“Victor, I know things.”

“I’ll kill you before you dare breathe a word,” he sneered, then grinned. “Nah, I like you. We’re cool. Can you send in the girl? I’m thirsty.”

Wendy breathed through her teeth as Victor shut the door. He heard her summon him a bottle of water. A female voice was squabbling. He looked at himself in the mirror and liked what he saw. Then, he took a penknife out of his pocket, which was running sidelong his growing erection. There was a knock at the door.

The stagehand was standing there with a miniature cooler containing several water bottles. He invited her in. He touched eyes with Wendy, hers showing unsteadiness and fear, and then closed the door.

The stagehand, her name was Valerie, started lauding his appearance and apologizing for her lack of professionalism. Victor grabbed her by the waist and brought her in for a kiss. She purred. He unfurled the blade of his penknife and traced it against the back of her neck and spine, pausing at her kidneys. He moved his other hand under her chin, tilted her head, and extended his fingers around her throat. He raised his knife high, tightening his grasp around her neck.

There was another knock at the door.

He sheathed the blade, let go of the flustered fan, and answered.

“Hi, Mr. Lang.” Now, Rachel was at the door with a basket of flavoured waters. “I just wanted to thank you and tell you that I believe in you and you’re like my idol and I’m so happy I got to...”

Victor contemplated inviting her in, too. The both of them. *How fun.*

“Victor!” Wendy shouted from just outside the door. “We have to go to the Phillippe Prud’homme shoot, the press junket, and then, the gala!” She grabbed Victor’s arm, again. “Sorry ladies, he has engagements.”

Wendy and Victor met with security and began their march to the parking lot. Bernardo was waiting at the limo. They could see the stretch Sedan about 40 meters through a blustering hive of fans and supporters. There was a thick wall of Victor Lang t-shirts, Bristol boards with amatory slogans, plush dolls, and toys raised into the air.

The behemoth guards, a fleet of eight, tried to move the horde of adorers back, each clamouring to get a picture of the actor. To touch him. To be near him.

Who else could generate this type of love? This type of mind and heart controlling obedience? I could do a Jim Jones. Send all my fans pills in the mail and have them take them at the same exact time. How about that? I'm God to these people. I'm their Christ, their Muhammed, and their Jehova. I'm the reason they get up in the morning and go to work. I'm more important than their own families. They'd kill for me. They'd die for me.

The sullen man from the audience was holding up a sign with a different kind of slogan: *Lang Is A Rapist*.

He was yelling hoarsely at the actor: accusatory, defamatory, and entirely accurate chants. Wendy told Victor to ignore him.

"I won't have to," Victor said. He stopped, looked at the man, and told the mob to remove him.

Just like a school of piranhas would move towards the leg of a bushman, the crowd swallowed him. A small pocket of the mass sent shockwaves that fizzled out within a few rows. The man, to the best of Victor's vigilance, didn't return to his feet nor was his sign visible any longer.

Victor turned his head to Wendy. She shook hers quickly. "That's another fire to put out, Christ almighty."

Mere feet from the gate that was cordoning off the limousine, a man broke through security.

"Victor, Victor! I'm your number one fan!" yelled the man, his whole body shivering like a struck tuning fork. He was overwhelmed. His face was starched with shock that he'd made it through the mob and was now standing face-to-face with his idol.

A guard put his paw on the man's collar.

"No," Victor said. He waved off the guard. "What's your name, sir?"

"My name?" repeated the man with muted exasperation. "D-David. My name's David."

"Hello, David." Victor smiled.

Look at him. He'd do anything for me. He loves me and doesn't know anything about me, other than what he's seen in films. An idiot. A hopeless, benign, resounding idiot.

"Put her here, David." He extended his arms for a hug. He loved knowing their names.

David rushed in and folded his arms around Victor. He put his head on his shoulder. Wendy watched tears squeeze out of David's eyes from behind as he realized his dream and achieved the apex of his life. He'd been granted his greatest wish like a child dying from leukemia. She saw his eyes snap open and his eyelashes vibrate. A slight cough rattled dryly.

Victor removed the blade from David's back, held it high, and plunged it in again. His hand was darting up-and-down at a blurring speed. He moved the knife to David's clavicle with the same swiftness, then to his neck. He stabbed with the vigor of a press. Up and down. Mechanical. Unstoppable. Little holes squirted and oozed. David's face was frozen in disbelief. His neck had lost power. His eyes, unglued from their state of horror, slithered upwards. His body went slack. His arms dropped. Then, the rest of him. Victor continued to drive the small knife into David as he crumpled, finally landing on his back.

From a kneeling position, Victor raised his hand. It was red and slick in the sunlight.

The guards, the agent, the paparazzi, and the worshipping fans were all frozen in place. *In awe and incredulous.*

Victor glanced over his shoulder at Wendy and winked.