

1

Plenipotentiary, Lily Henshaw, Ambassador to the Night. “Pleni” meant *full*, and “potenti” meant *power*, or potential, and “ary” didn’t mean much of anything, but Lily liked to think it meant “airy,” as if she had the *air* of reaching her full potential tonight, after three martinis with Eric and Kris and Mia. The December air felt cold rushing through the open car windows against her exposed arms, but not too cold, not this year. Now that the bars had closed, they rode in Kris’s swanky BMW through mostly empty city streets. Kris had probably had too many glasses of wine to maintain her role as designated driver, but she was the best off of all of them, and no one cared. Two days after Christmas, on Eric’s birthday, the cops were home celebrating, the lights still hung in everybody’s windows, and everyone still shone with miraculous possibilities. Plenipotentiary. The night welcomed them.

Kris signaled to get onto the highway, and a car honked as she swerved onto the entrance ramp. The city streets were *mostly* empty. They would never be entirely empty. A few other headlights always appeared in the rear views, which Lily could see by tilting her head left or right from the passenger seat. She could also see Eric and Mia in the back, Mia with her head on Eric’s shoulder, Eric hunkered down and humming. While Lily had consumed three of the bar’s special pear-infused martini concoctions, Eric had done it up like a straight guy, downing untold amounts of straight Irish whisky while sermonizing about the pleasures of age, which, having just turned thirty-two, he knew least well of all of them. Lily, at thirty-four,

was second youngest. She and Eric were the only ones who had never been married. All four of them were single now.

Going home with a gay man and two other women meant her *potenti* would do her a fat lot of good, as she would likely say goodbye, let herself into her apartment, and *maybe* pop some popcorn to soak up some of the alcohol before passing out on her sofa or possibly, *possibly* get all the way to her queen-sized bed to sleep alone. She'd had dates but not brought a man home in over a year. Well, other than Eric, who more than once had slept over drunk on the sofa or even in her bed. Was that normal? She didn't know. Or care much, really, except Mia said they needed to have just-girls nights sometimes, but Kris and Lily had known Eric since college, and Kris said she wished she had married him instead of Peter, as a husband who sucked dick would be better than a husband who was one.

Mia said they didn't understand the difference having a night of just girls would make, and Lily said they understood just fine, and now Mia had her head on Eric's shoulder. *Plenipotentiary*. *Potenti* did not require other men. The four of them, here in Kris's fine automobile, were *pleni* on their own.

Lily might stay single forever, as long as she could have nights like tonight. People were still off work and crowding the bars, so they'd had to wait for a table at the pub they'd chosen for after dinner, but once they'd gotten in, they'd settled down and received a lot of attention from the server, who provided eye candy and conversation during each of his frequent visits to check on their drinks. Kris insisted that he... Brett... was flirting with all four of them, a very twenty-first century approach to getting a big tip, which worked. Brett had pretty hair and eyes and said he was from Hawaii. Lily had brown hair and blue-grey eyes and was from Kentucky, white like Eric, Mia, and Kris but like them, too, in being open-minded. Brett looked fit, and when Eric asked, he said he played soccer, whereas Lily mostly sat at her office and in front of the television and was beginning to worry that her favorite skirt was getting too small. During the first drink, Brett's flirting did nothing for her, but after the second, she realized she was, in fact, *in on it*, and the fantasy that made her friends giggle made her giggle, too.

The cold air from the windows lifted her hair and made her voice disappear

CRAZY TIME

as she hummed softly along with Eric. *Pleni*.

Another car honked, this one speeding up from behind and passing them. Lily tilted her head away from the open window, toward Kris: "What was that about?"

"I must've cut them off. Screw 'em." Kris's grin looked a little maniacal.

"Hey," Mia said from the back. Her head had left Eric's shoulder. "Drive safe."

"Yeah," Eric touted. "Dwive slafe." He laughed. Mia slapped him and laughed.

Kris gave an exaggerated sigh. "And the annoying jerk award goes to?"

"Someone whose birthday it *isn't*?" Eric offered.

"Must be it," Lily said, balancing the divide.

"Technically," Kris said, pointing at the car's console clock, "your birthday was yesterday."

"Birthdays extend into the a.m. of the next day. It's the law," Eric said.

"He's right." Lily wagged a finger at the clock.

"Can you believe this jerk behind me with his brights on?" Kris asked.

"What jerk?" Mia turned her whole body in the back seat as Lily twisted her neck. "Uh! I'm blind!"

"No kidding! I'm tempted to check the brakes." Kris sounded serious.

"That's my cue." Eric buckled his seatbelt.

Mia righted herself in her seat and pleaded, "Don't."

"She wasn't serious," Lily said.

Adjusting the central rearview, Kris agreed. "I wasn't serious." She changed lanes to the right and slowed down.

"Don't flash your brights, either," Mia said.

Lily felt a chill in her spine. The feeling of *pleni* started to leak from her tailbone, draining as she felt high color leave her face. She thought of putting up the car window.

"What?" Kris asked. "Is there some guy with an axe there in the backseat with you two?"

"Yeah, didn't I tell you? I took Brett home in my pocket, and he's got a really big... axe." Eric laughed alone.

Potential. “Mia is talking about the other one,” Lily said.

Kris asked, “The other what?”

Mia responded, “The other... what do you call it, urban legend. About cars with their brights on.”

Not the one you were thinking of, Miss Kristy. Not the one where the woman is in the car ALONE, and she’s terrified because the car behind her keeps flashing its high beams at her, and when she changes lanes, it changes lanes—

The car with the high beams on had not changed lanes, but it hadn’t passed.

—and when she slows down, it slows down, and it flashes its brights again. How did that story end? The car behind wasn’t the bad guy, of course, because the bad guy was an axe murderer hiding in the back seat, and every time he would try to get up to attack, the other car would flash its brights to scare him back down. But did the murderer finally attack anyway, maybe when the stupid driver finally drove away from the high beam flashing car that was trying to protect her? Or did the driver pull over to confront the people in the other car and thereby discover the danger in time? Or thereby unleash the murderer to kill them all? How the hell did the story end?

“What urban legend?” Kris asked.

“I know what you gals are thinking,” Eric said. “The high beam initiation.”

Everybody dies in that one. That’s how it ends. Everybody dies. An axe murderer? Who knows. But a gang initiation? Everybody dies in the end.

“It’s a true story, too,” Eric said. “These gangs—”

“*Shit*, Eric, all of these stories start out, ‘It’s a true story, too.’” Mia scoffed.

Kris looked preoccupied with driving.

“It might not have *been* true when it started,” Eric said, “but it’s true now. Because people act out the story. Gang leaders make their new recruits drive around with their high beams on, and when somebody flashes them, the gang runs them off the road—”

“But that’s not how it goes,” Kris said. The car was behind them again, but its brights weren’t on. It looked like a pickup truck. Hard to tell what color.

“Come to think of it, you’re right,” Mia said.

“I’m confused,” Lily said. She looked at the truck in her side mirror. It

CRAZY TIME

was following pretty closely but not doing anything else.

“The gang car doesn’t start with its high beams on,” Kris said. “It drives around with the lights off. Then, when someone flashes it to let the driver know his lights are off, its brights come on, and it runs the Good Samaritan off the road. Moral: don’t try to help people.”

“That’s kind of the moral of the other one, too, when you think about it,” Eric said. “The people flashing their lights are just trying to help the dumb bitch with the axe murderer in the back seat, and she thanks them by thinking they’re the psychos.”

Mia slapped him again. “That’s sexist, you dumb bitch.”

Eric giggled.

The pickup truck signaled right and started inching up alongside Kris’s BMW. On Lily’s side. Lily put up her window and said, “If we flashed our lights, we wouldn’t be doing it to be helpful. We’d be making a point. *Turn off your brights, asshole, or you forgot to turn on your headlights, asshole.* Either way—”

“Either way, we’re calling the other guy an asshole, is what you’re saying,” Eric said.

“I didn’t do anything,” Kris said. “What’s this ‘we’ crap?”

The truck was beside them now, some shade of red or orange, visible in the highway lights, but the windows were too dark—tinted?—to see inside. “We’re all in this together,” Lily said.

“What’s *this*?” Mia asked.

“Oh sister, our Lady Lily is getting *freaked out*,” Eric said.

Was she? Maybe she was. Lily had gone from thinking about fullness and power to axe murderers and gangs, and it wasn’t a pleasant trip, not at all. Maybe they could take her back to where she’d been, and that would be fine, but the nice little buzz in her brain had sunk to a different pitch, and now she couldn’t stop glancing over her shoulder at that truck, which was going a little faster than they were, pulling ahead. Kris had both hands on the steering wheel. She wasn’t talking as much, didn’t have the same light tone as Mia and Eric. Did she feel the truck, too, bearing down on them? For Kris, was the truck something other than a light subject of conversation, a casual,

laughable launch-pad to the oh-so-funny matters of axe-murder and gang initiation?

The truck was almost all the way in front of them now. It looked like one of those heavy-duty, four-wheel-drive deals, maybe with a back seat in the cab and an extra-wide bed. The rear window was opaque, too. No sign of a gun rack.

“Look at that,” Kris said. “He’s signaling left now, getting in front of us.” The truck pulled in front of them, close. Lily noted, cutting off an inhale, that the truck lacked a license plate. The bareness reflected the BMW’s headlights.

“Hey,” Eric said. “How do you know he’s a he?”

“The pickup truck kind of screams penis to me,” Mia said.

“Good point,” Eric said.

“You guys,” Kris said, “he is *right* in front of us, and I think he’s matching our speed on purpose. We are the only ones on the road right now. This is ridiculous.” She changed lanes to the left and sped up.

“Kris, be careful,” Lily said. The truck would appear at her shoulder again soon.

“You know that’s my exit up ahead,” Mia said.

“I know,” Kris said, watching the speedometer. “I’m just going to pass this fucker.”

“The lane to the left is clear,” Lily said, not sure whether anyone heard. The truck, with its uninviting windows and many speeds, all calculated to thwart what started out as such a triumphantly pleasant ride home, needed to be *far*, far from the world of Lily and of Kris’s BMW, which mocked the workmanlike sincerity of the truck’s wide bed and sticker that said 4-WHEEL DRIVE. It was not a beat-up old pickup truck. It sparkled in the light with newness, extra cleanness. Someone cared about that vehicle. If it had hands and feet, it might not line up for a mani-pedi, but it would maintain even, square-cut nails that left tiny marks when it bundled up fists for mighty blows. The truck was serious, calculated, and Lily wanted it *away*.

“There,” Kris said, and she changed lanes, putting the truck back in the rearview. It signaled left and started pulling up closer to the driver’s side. “This is ridiculous!” Kris yelled. She sped up.

CRAZY TIME

“Kris,” Lily said.

“Drive safe,” Eric said, no irony.

Mia: “My exit—”

The truck matched speed, pulled ahead, signaled. “I’ll be damned,” Kris said, “if I let this fucker pass me again.” She sped up. Lily looked at the speedometer. Close to one hundred. Over one hundred.

“That was my exit!!”

“Let him go!” Eric yelled.

“Kris,” Lily said, but Kris wasn’t listening. Kris must have been thinking, *I’ll be damned if some pickup truck thinks it can outrace ME. You think you know fast? BMW is pleni-fucking-potentiary.* One-ten. One-twenty. The truck fell back a bit but did not fall behind.

The BMW’s passengers took turns yelling, “Kris!” Engines were audible through windows still down, with wind ripping through, but the wind’s mad flag-rippling noises underscored a greater silence, no blaring music or car horns, nothing but intentness from the two vehicles, going faster, faster. One-thirty.

“We’re going to die tonight,” Lily said. The words left her lips without the aid of thought or volition. The wind was so loud, her voice so soft, that she thought maybe others didn’t hear her. But the words fell with a solemn weight of truth, and they must have hit Kris, because another sound, a foot leaving the accelerator, reached them all, and the pickup truck to their left lurched ahead before it, too, began to slow.

“Thank God.” Mia’s voice, from the backseat, sounded tame. Then the voice screamed, and Eric’s voice joined it, and Lily heard herself screaming as well. Confusion. Panic. Kris was too busy wrestling the steering wheel to scream. The jolt they all felt had them flailing in their seats, and the motion of the truck, which seemed to bounce from becoming one with them on their left to being two lanes over to being in front of them to being off to their right, mimicked the rocking of their emotions as they tried to find inner moorings. Kris tapped the brakes, causing a partial spin, but she had the sense to let the car right itself while straddling two lanes, then, with momentum, skip from lane to lane until she managed to slow and find sense

in the chaos of lines and dashes that defined highway order. Another car with the misfortune of sharing the road with the pickup and the BMW blared its horn as it dodged and sped by the two vehicles that were hogging the road. When the new vehicle's noise had passed, and the BMW again carried forward in a more-or-less straight manner, Lily understood, and she felt her friends understand, what had happened.

The pickup had tried to get back in front of Kris, and it had sideswiped them in the process, sending both vehicles wild across the many lanes of the highway. Now, they both moved forward at sensible speeds, regaining bearings.

Kris slammed her horn. "Goddamned idiots! Goddamned idiots!" She slowed and signaled right.

Panic still in her voice, Mia said, "Kris, what are you doing?"

"Pulling over is what I'm doing! And those fuckers are coming with me!" The BMW pulled dangerously close to the righted tail of the pickup, blared its horn, flashed its lights, and signaled demonstratively before pulling right. The truck seemed to hesitate before it pulled right, too.

"They're coming," Lily said.

Eric said, "We don't know who these guys are."

"Yeah, we do," Kris said. "They're the people who just scraped the shit out of my car, and I'm at least getting their insurance. Somebody, get out your cell and call the police."

Lily got out her phone. Do you call 911 for traffic problems, even if they're not emergencies? A sideswipe was a little more than a fender-bender, but not much. A sideswipe plus an urban legend was scary, sure, but the police in a city like this one were unlikely to be appreciative. She had better call the operator and ask. On cell phones, do you still press 0 to get an operator? She felt sober now, but her brain wasn't working right. She pressed 0 and the call button. Maybe she should call 411. She knew that would work.

Both vehicles came to a stop in the breakdown lane. Kris unbuckled her seatbelt and got out before anybody could object. Lily had trouble connecting, so she hung up. Eric and Mia talked about whether they should get out. Doors on both sides of the pickup truck opened. They'd parked between two bright

CRAZY TIME

streetlights, which revealed the truck to be as fire-engine red as the BMW was midnight blue. One of the streetlights had a fast flicker.

Two men got out of the pickup truck. Lily dialed 411 and asked for the police listing. Eric opened the door on his side, Lily's side. Kris was moving toward the two men. One of them wore a soft, brown leather bomber jacket and collared shirt, a polo, with grey slacks, and the other wore jeans and an army-green coat with many pockets and the kind of shirt people called a "wife-beater," a sleeveless undershirt. Both men were white, which contradicted Lily's idea of a gang, middle-aged, too, the collared guy mostly bald and the wife-beater with a few days of scruffy beard growth, both a little paunchy and jowly. Their regular-white-guy appearances set her more at ease, which made her feel guilty, guilty yet more at ease, even as 411 told her to call 911 to report the accident.

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?" Kris yelled.

"Oh shit," Eric said, and he got out of the car. Mia followed. Lily stayed seated, the phone her excuse. The streetlight, the one a little closer to them, flickered. A few lanes over, a car sped by.

"Evening," Mr. Collar said. Mr. Wife-Beater agreed.

"Evening?" Kris said. "Are you two so stoned out of your gourds that you don't even know how late... how early... it is? What time it is? And why the hell were you driving like that? Huh?" She did a half turn and gestured toward what must have been long scrapes on the driver's side of the BMW. "Do you see what you did to my car?"

"We know what time it is, sure," Mr. Collar said.

Standing back by her door, Mia said, "Kris," and Lily thought, *dwive slafe*.

"You just thought it would be *fun* to drive in *circles* around somebody? Well look what happens!" Kris was indignant. Lily imagined the wide-eyed, expectant look on Kris's face. 911 had her on hold.

Eric moved forward, stood near Lily's window, then got closer to Mr. Wife-Beater. Eric and the green-coated man exchanged nods.

Mr. Collar took a step toward Kris, who took a step back. "Ma'am, do you know what time it is?"

"It's after three in the morning," Lily said by accident, out loud, and the

phone made a click.

“911, what is the nature of your emergency?”

Eric backed past Lily’s window again, and Mia gave an aborted yelp. Lily looked at neither of them for more than a glance. Instead, she looked at Mr. Collar, who said, “*It’s crazy time!*”

And Lily said, “Oh my God he’s got a gun.”

And the gunman said, “Rob, get that bitch with the phone out of the car.”

Rob, Mr. Wife-Beater, smashed Lily’s closed window with a tire iron, and Lily screamed into the phone. The voice on the other end asked questions about who had the gun, where was she, and so on, but Lily called out no answers as Rob snatched the phone from her fingers, threw it down on asphalt, and smashed it with the iron. When Eric bent as if to stop him, Rob swung the iron and almost sunk the claw into Eric’s head.

Stunned, Lily felt her door open as she watched Mr. Collar approach Kris, gun pointing out of the bomber jacket like a surprise twist from a noir movie. Kris backed into Mia, who had been standing behind her, deer in headlights. “Ladies, please go to the other side of this fine automobile,” Mr. Collar said.

Fine automobile, the words plucked from Lily’s brain.

As the gunman ushered them around, the streetlight above flickered like a bug zapper in a swarm and went out. In the car, Lily whimpered, and Rob told her to get out, and she did, standing beside Eric, soon joined in the newly shadowy space by Kris and Mia. The car now separated them from what little traffic drove the clear, fast, dark patch of highway through the city.

Crazy time.

Kris would hate herself for it, but she was already crying. “What do you want?”

Mr. Collar and Rob stood on either side of their four-person cluster, forming two walls while the car and the highway’s concrete embankment formed two others, penning them. From the working streetlight, nearest the truck, to the broken one, behind the BMW, they stood Rob, Lily, Eric, Mia, Kris, and Mr. Collar. “What do we want,” Mr. Collar said, pointing the gun at Kris’s face. “What do we want? Rob? Tell them?”

“Sure thing, Earl. Ladies and gentleman, please put your phones on the

CRAZY TIME

ground. Do it gentle, though. You break it, you bought it. Except you.” Rob touched Lily’s hair, and Lily wanted to throw up. The other three prisoners took out their phones, all smart flat rectangles, and set them on asphalt.

“Good,” Earl, Mr. Collar, said. “Now tell me, which one takes the best video?”

A pause. Earl pressed the gun against Kris’s lips and repeated the question.

Eric said, “Mine. I think.”

“Eric!” Mia said.

“Thanks, Eric.” Keeping the gun on Kris, Earl walked around, picked up Eric’s phone, and gestured for Rob to join him in examining it. “Now Eric, I want you to open this up and show me how to start the video.” Eric complied. “Good boy. Now smile everybody.” Phone pointing from one hand, gun from the other, Earl used the phone’s camera to capture the four of them standing in a line, Lily shaking and dazed, Eric slack-jawed and staring at his phone as if it had betrayed him, Mia with a flat look of disbelief, Kris intent on the gun. “Come on now, Rob, trade with me, would you?”

Rob took the gun, and Earl took the tire iron. The gun, Lily noticed, was a revolver of some kind, but she didn’t think that information was helpful, as six bullets would be more than enough. Rob’s hands shook when he took the gun. That was something. He didn’t have Earl’s confidence. At this range, though, confidence seemed optional. The barrel pointed at Eric. Earl walked back toward Kris with the tire iron and the camera.

“W-w-w,” Lily said. The look on Rob’s face terrified her. It was pity.

“Shhhh!” Mia said. Eric stared into the gun like he had stared at his phone.

All eyes turned to Earl as Kris said, “I don’t know what you hope to accomplish. We don’t have much money, and we don’t—”

The movement was swift. The tire iron bent back like a baseball bat and swung forward, cracking against Kris’s skull. The spray upon contact hit Mia and the BMW and disappeared in the direction of the darkened streetlight. In her periphery, Lily might have seen a swatch of skin and hair torn away by the blow, the blow slowed down immeasurably by the shock of perceiving it as her own knees gave way, but as her mind replayed it a thousand times, adding brain and bone and more, she would never know what was real. She

just knew that the collision of iron with head made a cracking noise that synced with the passing of a car, and she went down at the same time as Kris, only Kris went down further, spinning so her back hit asphalt, and her spattered face pointed up at the night with wide eyes.

Mia and Eric screamed, which made the gun go crazy, pointing from one of them to another, but Lily only felt the pain in her knees from where they'd slammed into asphalt. Earl was laughing and panning across the four of them—three of them and Kris's body—with the phone camera. Rob was saying, "Here we go, here we go, here we go, here we go!"

W-w-what is—

"*CRAZY TIME!*" Earl matched Kris's dead eyeline and shouted at heaven. Mia bawled as Earl recited, on camera,

"Nothing in heaven was e'er so sublime

As the three blind mice during crazy time.

They ate the kitchen and then through the den;

They ate the rooster and gobbled the hen.

They chomped and they chomped until they got fat,

They ate up the house, even the old cat.

Watch out for those mice, before they are through,

They'll eat all your goodies—even eat you!"

Earl giggled and giggled and stepped in the growing puddle near Kris's head, smearing it with his foot. He videoed the smear.

Mia and Eric weren't screaming anymore. They stood hypnotized by the gun that oscillated between them. Lily watched and tried not to think about the pain in her knees, which seemed trivial compared to everything else, but it insisted on attention, because she had fallen so fast and so hard, but not as fast and hard as Kris, who might have broken her head open with the fall, if it hadn't already been... already been...

"So Earl, what's next?" Rob asked. He looked to his leader.

Eric acted. He dove at Rob, whose gun lowered when he turned to Earl. Rob turned at the moment of impact, and the gun went off. Stumbling, Rob kept his footing, and Eric flew back with the force of the shot, striking and shaking the car before he crumbled. Lily couldn't see where he was hit.

CRAZY TIME

Without standing, she pivoted to him, searching his prone body for signs of a wound she quickly found in a gush from his midsection, near the right hip, some of which seemed to be missing. Lily's fluttering hands gathered up shreds of surrounding clothes and applied pressure.

Earl laughed as Rob returned and aimed the gun down at Eric, who shouted, "Fireflies!"

Mia seemed about to join Lily in helping Eric, but Earl said, "No way. One of you needs to stand up here and enjoy the night sky with me, right? Come here, beautiful." He gestured for Mia to come closer.

"No!" Mia said.

Earl used the tire iron like a hook. "Come *closer*," he said, pulling at Mia's shoulder.

"Earl!" Rob pulled the gun in close again, noir style. "Lower the iron!" Rob gestured, and Lily turned to look. A police car was driving by, slowing. Lily realized Kris had left the BMW's lights on—good for her—and though three of them were down, the other three—Rob, Mia, and Earl—were standing and visible from the road, despite the broken streetlight. The scene looked like some kind of accident. The police car was stopping for them.

It passed but pulled over beyond the pickup truck. "Keep it cool, Rob. Trade." They switched gun and tire iron.

Maybe the police car was stopping because of Lily's phone call. They could have traced it, could have used the GPS in Lily's phone before Rob smashed it. If so, then the cop would at least be on his guard when he got out of his car, expecting some sort of funny business with the two men and the woman he could see from the road. Eric had almost gotten the better of one of them, and he'd never been in a fight in his life. A cop with a gun could do much more, get much further, maybe even take the two men (assailants) down, maybe even shoot them (the murderers) before they could make up their minds to strike first, so Lily had to hope Rob and Earl would try to cover up what was going on, the fact that Kris was (dead) lying on the ground in a pool of blood, and so was Eric (Lily had to stop the bleeding).

Lily was applying pressure, but all Mia had to do was scream. Earl started walking toward the cop car. Rob kept the tire iron low but ready, his eyes

shifting from Kris to Mia, threatening. All Mia had to do was scream. Lily had to apply pressure.

Eric moaned.

“Evening, Officer,” Lily heard Earl say.

“More like good morning.”

“It’s that crazy time when neither night nor morning seems quite right, does it?”

“Stay back with your vehicle, please sir.”

Good. That was suspicion. Lily couldn’t see the cop, but she imagined his—the voice was a man’s—hand on his holster when he gave the order. She’d never wanted to see a cop so much before in her life. Crazy, stupid thought. She imagined a cute guy, maybe around her age, catching a glimpse of what was going on, not letting on until he was sure he’d be the quicker draw, then BLAM! Down goes Earl. With Earl down, Rob would be sure to surrender. On first appearance, Rob was the badass, with his wife-beater shirt and military-looking coat, but that was all appearances. He was the backup; Earl was the brains. Without Earl, Rob would fold in a second. And a second would be all Officer Hero needed to turn this situation over and set it right. Maybe Kris was just unconscious. If the cop acted fast, an ambulance might save her and Eric both.

They’d all be okay, and then maybe the cop would ask her out on a date or something. *Potenti.*

“Hey Officer, you know something funny?” Earl said. “That light up there, that streetlight, went out right as we pulled over. You see? The one up there.”

DON’T LOOK!

“Hey Officer? Smile for the camera!” The gunshot cracked the night.

Quiet. Officer Hero must have looked up, then down too late. Or maybe...?

“Earl? You get him?” Rob didn’t take his eyes off Mia, the tire iron poised. Lily kept trying to stop Eric’s bleeding, but she listened and watched as she could.

Earl stepped back into Lily’s range of vision and handed Rob a pistol. “Should have seen his face,” Earl said, “while he had one.” He laughed. Rob laughed, too, but he was faking. Mia made a sound like she was trying

CRAZY TIME

to scream, but it sounded like a retch instead.

Eric said, "Please God."

"No," Earl said to Eric, "I don't think so. But I need *you* to do something for me." He tucked the gun into his belt, behind him. "Your stupid phone cut out when I was with that cop, which means my movie got cut. I need you to tell me your PIN number."

Lily thought of Eric always saying "PIN number is redundant" and hoped he wouldn't say it now. She thought of him saying "fireflies" a moment ago and realized he wasn't likely to say much of anything at all. The bleeding was slowing.

From somewhere, Earl produced a pocketknife, a big one. He opened it and said to Lily, "Hold up his head and make sure he can see me." She kept one hand on the bleeding wound and used the other to hold up Eric's head as well as she could. His eyes were open at slits. Whether he saw anything she couldn't say. "It's Eric, right?" Earl asked.

Eric said nothing.

"Bitch," Earl said, "make him nod." Lily froze. "Bitch, nod his fucking head!" Lily moved Eric's head to make it look like he was nodding. "Good. I want us on the same page. We've got to be *on the same page*, don't we, Ron?"

"It's Rob tonight, Earl."

"Oh. Yeah. Rob. Same page, right?"

"Same page."

Earl took the pocketknife and jabbed it into Mia's stomach three times. She gasped and doubled over, holding herself, but she did not fall. Instead, she leaned back, supporting herself against the BMW. "Now Eric," Earl said, "I realize you probably feel like you're dying and shit, and hell, you might very well be, but I need a four digit number from you, and you'll either give it to me, or I'm going to find more non-essential places where I can stick this knife in your girlfriend. Or maybe—" and he took a step toward Lily and grabbed a wad of her long brown hair—"your other girlfriend." He giggled as he cut off first one, then another huge lock of hair and threw it down in Eric's blood.

Eric's mouth started moving, but the initial sounds lacked shape. Rob said,

“He’s trying to talk.”

“Well shit,” Earl said. “He’ll have to try harder.” He paced back and forth. Mia slid down the side of the car, not quite curling down to a sitting position, her hands cupping her bleeding stomach.

Lily glanced over her shoulder as a car, merely a car, drove by on the highway. The driver couldn’t *not* see them, but at any significant speed, under the dim streetlight, they would look like a parked car and a parked truck, little more. But Officer Hero had to have radioed in his position before he stopped to investigate, right? And when he didn’t radio again, dispatch would send another car, maybe two or three... any moment now, help would come. They just had to survive. Lily could see no rising and falling in Kris’s body, no sign of life at all, but Eric was still making noises, and Mia wasn’t even sitting. And Lily wasn’t a doctor. They could all make it out of this alive. They only had to survive a little longer. Had to—

“Give me the tire iron,” Earl said. Rob complied. Earl bounced the iron in his hand, gaining momentum. “I said you’d better try,” he bounced, “a little,” he bounced higher, “HARDER!” Earl brought the iron down on one of Eric’s legs.

At the resultant snap, Eric didn’t scream, but his body contracted like a spider on its back. His head tipped to one side, and heavy drool leaked from his mouth. Lily kept pressure on the wound, where bleeding gained force with the rising of Eric’s damaged legs.

“A NUMBER!” Earl yelled, and he hit the same leg again, forcing it back down to asphalt. No snap. A limp thud.

Barely able to breathe, Lily said, “Seventeen seventy-six.”

Earl readjusted so he held only the phone, and he punched in the number. “Well I’ll be,” he said. “You knew all along. Could have saved your boyfriend some hurt, couldn’t you?” Earl pressed some buttons and lined up the camera. “And we’re go! Rob, if you would finish this bastard, please.”

With no apparent shyness about how badly his hand shook, Rob aimed the cop’s pistol at Eric. Lily thought she should protest, cover Eric’s body with hers, but she knelt silently by her friend, watching. She saw Rob’s finger move on the trigger.

CRAZY TIME

Nothing.

“Safety’s on,” Earl said.

“How’s it work?” Rob held the gun so loosely he might have dropped it.

“It’s that little switch....” The two men almost huddled, and for a moment, neither one of them had eyes on any of Lily’s friends. Mia couldn’t run because she’d been stabbed, and though her backside hadn’t ever reached asphalt, she was dazed in her position by the car, and her hands had fallen limp at her sides, no longer cradling her bleeding stomach. Eric hadn’t been fully conscious for a long time. The only thing stopping Lily from charging out onto the highway, where a car passed at least every minute or so, was the pain in her knees, and that, compared to the bullet in Eric and the knife wounds in Mia, was nothing, nothing at all, but it throbbed, tightened, told her she could do *nothing*.

Another crack in the night. Earl stood away from Rob, who had, at last, pulled the trigger on a ready weapon. Eric died.

“Great shot,” Earl said, referring to the camera, which he held close to the chest wound. Lily felt blood on her. On her face, soaking through her clothes. She didn’t know how much. Earl pointed the camera at her, then at Eric again, then at Mia, whose jaw hung open. He brought the phone right up to her gaping mouth, and she didn’t move. “Weird,” he said. “I didn’t think I hurt this one too much.” He grabbed her and pulled her forward, away from the car, and she splayed out on asphalt.

Without thinking, Lily fell backward. Enormous relief flooded her calves as the pressure in her knees released. She was sitting on the asphalt now, and it felt good. Rob stood close to her. Earl was walking around to the other side of the car. “Damned bitch took the keys out of the ignition.” Lily watched him come back around and search Kris’s body. Definitely a body. She wasn’t breathing any more than Eric was. Mia was still breathing but not much. Wouldn’t be for long. You could only bleed for so long on the side of the road where nobody noticed.

Earl took the keys and started Kris’s car. “Now that’s an engine that *purrs*,” he said. “Hey, uh, Rob, finish the last one after I go, will you, and then meet me at the ron-day-voo?”

Earl drove off, and Lily looked in Rob's eyes. He returned that same pitying look before he shot her.