

EVENA
PANDEMIC
CAN'T STOP
LOVE AND
MURDER

So there he was in pain, half-drugged, caught in a crevasse between a dull awake and a heavy sleep, and it all became clear: everyone thought the world had *rules*... one set of *rules*. But it didn't. There were different rules for different people. He needed his own Rules. Yes, he thought, as he stared at the ceiling of the hospital room, feeling his pulse throb like a metronome, muscles singing with pain—he was alive. From here on in, he would make his own Rules to keep it that way.

A career in construction work proved fertile ground for creating his Rules. There was a natural hierarchy: workers, supervisors, Owners. And the guys above the Owners you never saw. Each had a highly defined role in the caste system of construction and subcontracting. Every day reminded him where *he* stood—at the bottom, lacking the money, power, or connections to change anything. That was fine. The powerful were the biggest pricks anyway.

EXCERPT

When he returned from Iraq, he had three duffle bags: clothes, shoes, and a pile of cash (he had spent hardly any of his highly paid hazardous-duty salary), with the promise of a small stipend from the Handlers (there were now two): “Enough to keep you off the streets.” They had handed him a no frills-looking credit card at the airport, admonishing him with the words, “Only for food, no rent, no gas, nothing but food.” These two Handlers were as no-frills as the card, looking like poorly carved duplicates. He was pretty sure they didn't know about the cash he had saved; on the last visit to pack at his hotel, the room had not been touched.

They didn't like that he would be living near known family, but after checking Dorothy out, they agreed, though they never said why. He hadn't flown since before the Pandemic. Cheap shits put him in coach for the long flight, and yes, he was double-masked, but as hard as they tried, and study after study, air travel still didn't feel safe; he felt like he was in a variant cesspool. Falling asleep did not feel like an option, as if when he was asleep, one would sneak in and he would get infected. Although it hurt

like hell, he kept himself awake the entire flight to JFK by occasionally using the seat belt to rub against his still-raw wound as a reminder.

From wheels down in JFK, they had given him only eight days to close up whatever was waiting for him to do in North Jersey (and do it so that no one knew he was even there) and get to Cherry Hill.

In Jersey City, he had to get busy. He craved seeing some old pals, but he had seen the fatwah video on YouTube—he swore never to watch it again—and he was damned if he was going to slip. The Handlers had driven it home; right before he left Baghdad one Handler played the YouTube clip of some guy ordaining in Arabic that Alby was to die—they would find him—it was only a matter of time. Knives and swords took over the screen. The vengeance of Allah would not be unanswered. There were subtitles, which Alby thought was odd. Nonetheless, as annoying as it was, he followed the Handlers' instructions, he avoided old friends or distant aunts and uncles—just when he needed them most. It only reinforced to him how truly alone he now was.

The Extended Stay America hotel was in Fort Lee, far enough away not to run into anyone he knew and just close enough to his family's storage facilities where he had left his and his mom's stuff. As low-end as it was, the hotel was a thousand times more comfortable than his room in the hotel in the Green Zone.

He tore through the family storage space, taking and tossing without much thought. Renting the truck was easy, but all the lifting and activity only served to make his wound ache more with each day, so much so that he had to lie perfectly still in bed at night. The weak-ass meds they gave him didn't work, so he threw those in the toilet.

By the time he had been back in the US for a week, the last of the good painkillers were gone—no refills—and the nightmares began.

Occasionally, he thought of old high school buddies he could call; he'd reach for the phone, then stop.

On day seven, all the contents of the storage unit had either been trashed or stored—either way never to be seen again, he knew. All he took was a leather boxing bag that his mom had given to him when he got engaged. He had been a little annoyed and had asked her why. "Relationships

are a contact sport.” She had paused and then given him that odd look she sometimes got: “you’ll appreciate it when you get back.” When he asked what she meant, she did the typical response: smirked and looked away. How had she known he was going to Iraq?

On the ride to Marlton, he kept things silent, his head empty.

They had given him eight days; he did it in seven. Was this what they had called a *new life*? It felt phony and hollow; the Jersey Turnpike didn’t help.

Their words rang in his ears: “Your job is to hide. You are now going to live a small life.”

He was beginning to suspect a small life meant no life.

Friday: 7 p.m.



Stephen dropped down, exhausted, on the two-seater couch. “Damn, Alby!” he said, as he landed on the broken spring. “Where’d you find this? On a curb?” Alby said nothing because he *had* found it on a curb, but why admit it? Besides, Stephen had walked in just as he was finishing his morning virus Listerstrip routine. Stephen had used that line over a hundred times already. Alby went to the small refrigerator and offered him an iced tea. Stephen nodded and took it, swigging down half in one gulp. Alby never really liked cold drinks, so he went to the card table for his second coffee cup. Starbucks was an expensive habit, but he spent money on nothing else, so...

“Could’ve got me one, you know.” Alby felt distracted; he had woken that morning with this deep sense that something wrong was going to happen. This feeling had lurked in his waking hours all his life, and every time had been proven right. He had once complained about it to his mom. She had given a sideways, unreadable glance and said: “Get used to it.” The whole day had gone by and nothing bad happened; in one corner of his consciousness, he was waiting.

“Picked up only a couple. Besides, I didn’t know you drank coffee.”

Stephen could not help but groan. “You buy me one every time we have a morning job together.”

“I stand corrected: I didn’t know you drank coffee other than in the morning. It’s dinner, right?” Stephen groaned again. He tossed his hair in a resigned nod. “Can I use your pisser?”

"You have to ask? Bathroom's small. No spraying!"

"If you hate it so much, move," Stephen told him. "I know plenty of apartment complexes you could probably afford. Get out of this hole in the wall."

A shadow passed over Alby's face. "Place is just fine." He had to change the topic. "Quiz time!" and continuing with a fake game show host voice exclaimed, "Rule number one!" Almost unconsciously, he took out the ebony switchblade and started opening and closing it as he waited. Alby had to wonder if Stephen was a masochist, the way he just kept wrestling with Alby's view on everything, which he knew Stephen was about to do again.

"Don't trust anyone." Stephen sighed and wiped a hand across his dirty forehead. "You really believe that?"

Alby held up a hand. "No, it's 'never trust anyone.'" He paused like it was an intellectual conundrum. "'Don't' implies there's some exceptions."

Stephen snarled, "Number two: Never do business with family or friends. You realize what a fucking hypocrite you are, right? I mean, I'm family and you spout out crap like that." Flashes of his mother colored Stephen's exasperation.

"Your grandmother hated foul language." Alby spoke with false solemnity; she had been as foul-mouthed a person as he had ever met. "I don't know where to start—on the nephew part or the fact that I made your mom a promise I'd get your sorry-ass some construction experience so you could work in this crazy economy. Teach you the trade so you can get a decent job with the infrastructure work." He realized he was getting sentimental. "Or is it the hypocrite part—oh, wait, I don't give a shit."

At that, Stephen got up and went to the bathroom. When he came out, it was like he'd never left the room...or the conversation. "Alby, you need to lighten up. That should be a Rule! It's like you just don't give a shit about anything. But I know you do." Stephen had taken his place back on the broken couch and was now crossing and uncrossing his long and currently stretched-out legs, knocking his feet against the floor in an attempt to loosen the dried dirt that had been caked into the heels of his steel-toed

boots onto an already stained throw rug. Alby looked up and shook his head but only replied to Stephen's comment.

"Name one thing."

Stephen shrugged; he was not going to take the bait.

Alby picked up a pen and wrote on a piece of paper already covered in scribbles that was taped to the wall by the desk next to a cheap-looking gas station calendar highlighting a picture of an old DeSoto by a gas pump. "Yeah, I like that...Rule number seven: don't ever give a shit."

"And the good thing is," Stephen was on a roll now, his voice coated in sarcasm, "it doesn't run into that other Rule about not falling in love."

"Right. That's six."

"Yesterday it was seven. You make it up as you go along. You know, it just occurred to me—why would you of all people waste a whole "Rule" on love?"

Alby ignored him. Truth was, he didn't know why he had a Rule for love. He just did. "Not true. The first six are sacrosanct. Uncuttable."

"Immutable."

Alby cut him off. "Your vocabulary will make you a great foreman." He paused and then took the jab: "That is, when you get a real job." He closed the switchblade by folding back his fingers and forcing the blade into its sheath. Stephen had the impatient look of a man wanting to leave and his actions followed through accordingly. He got up and said, "Gotta go home and get ready." He nodded as if to confirm his thoughts, pulling back his right shoulder like it had been out of place—the body action of a contractor who worked his parts too hard. "How'd the Ghoul Crew work out? Still not sure how you landed it."

"You're cute." Alby gave him an unfunny smile. "Clever." He paused. "And useless."

"Hey, Alby, you gotta admit...picking up a crew on a corner in Camden at 7:30 at night is a little risky. Morning is fine, but night? No one goes into that place after the sun goes down, especially a white guy. And that asbestos is messed up."

"This isn't some zombie movie!"

"You sure? And we gotta keep you alive so you actually show up at

my mom's party. No excuses." Stephen retorted, then cracked a smile.

"You done? It's my job. I got it. Money's good."

"Asbestos removal is bad shit. Bad. One lungful and you are done. And that bank you're working at, it's got a bad rep—"

"I am so glad I hired the EPA—you wanna switch jobs? That's why I hired the Crew to do the nasty work while I just hang out, sleep, and pick them up at dawn and make money. Take my cut off the top." Alby watched as Stephen passed by him and headed for the door, looking down at his phone. He began tapping away at the screen.

"One of our house frauen—I mean—customers?"

"Alby, I have a girlfriend. Let it go."

"Maybe I'll meet her someday." Stephen's face twisted a little, like he had eaten something sour, as he started to push on the screen door. But instead he turned and said, "See you later!" Then he paused. "You *are* coming, right? My mom really expects you. You can actually leave the cave occasionally, you know."

Alby nodded and waved him off as he went out the door, slamming it shut only to have it bounce off its frame and swing back open. Time to drive to Camden, he thought, and bent down to pat the sock on his right foot to feel the comfort of the switchblade.



He had been to Camden only twice, all in the last week. Although he lived less than five miles away, he hadn't known it was there; it was like some hidden island. Now, he understood why: they had constructed a force field around the ghetto part. It was cut off. The radical transition from glossy suburb to rotting ghetto was too abrupt—like passing through some psychic filter where you went from color to black-and-white.

Driving slowly was the only way to read the unfamiliar, graffiti-scarred street signs and the sun didn't help right then the way it was shining at that awkward angle when the shadows play tricks on the eyes. His left hand was tight on the steering wheel, the knuckles white; the other

hand was loose, ready to slip down to his right side and grab the waiting crowbar. He twisted his body slightly to the right to feel the press of his switchblade, which he had moved to his jacket pocket. The Ben Franklin Bridge loomed like a metal arrow, one end sweeping into the ground in Camden. Seeing the bridge lights come on as dusk settled, he realized that after a year, he had yet to even go to Philadelphia. Explicitly ordered to keep a low profile, after he arrived in Marlton and Cherry Hill, the thing that was protecting him made him unable to score a big job in the huge infrastructure work being done in Philly and elsewhere in Jersey. But with the recent semi-lockdown in Philly, he wasn't going anywhere.

Growing up in Jersey City, he had seen plenty of ghettos: Orange was a disaster, as was Newark. Baghdad certainly had its share of the Iraqi version of ghettos; in Iraq it was easy to tell ghettos from bombed ruins. "It was easy," he recalled a GI telling him as they had driven to the plant, "because ghettos don't have big round holes in them." Even now, Alby could still remember the sweat in the overheated Humvee, even while feeling a chill at the laugh that the GI let loose after he spoke. But he was right; Camden felt different—a square-mile petri dish of Hell. Dangerous, but nothing near the danger he felt when he had taken the morning Humvee to the power plant. At least here he didn't have to worry about the same type of deadly man-made evils. It felt more desolate than dangerous. The Pandemic's impact on black people made the whole place feel abandoned. Like so much while he was away, he missed it, but he knew enough to know it was a bad, bad story.

Part of the eeriness of this part of Jersey was the way things changed so quickly from one extreme to the other. One block would look like people had enough money to keep up appearances, with neat row houses, all the same design, clearly built at the same time, and well-lit by streetlights. Then, the next block was as opposite as you could get; a corner streetlight would be out and any feeling of safety along with it. It seemed that in Camden, those kept-up stretches were the short ones.

As Alby drove farther down this particular block, he could see that there were some people around but mostly they were barely visible on their porches. Some were rocking in chairs, some were standing, but all were

behind the cast iron bars closing in their tiny front spaces. A lot of them were holding onto the metal bars, and he could make out masks on some but most without them. They were the cheap kind, the blue tissue ones they originally used at hospitals before they got smart.

One-handed, he slowly spun the wheel to turn left at the corner into the empty lot on 4th Street. In the dusk, men milled about, glued together in small clusters. He eased to a stop.

He saw the bright, wide grin of the guy who was definitely the leader of the trio: a smiling Lucky with his two pals, Chance and Darnell, none with masks on. Instinctively, Alby slid his mask from the hook by the steering wheel and slipped it over his ears; he clicked the right side and the whole mask sprung around to click the open mouth shield into position with the frame on the other ear. These Warby Parker Plastimasks were expensive. To Alby, normally not given to shopping, with all this bubbling news and mis-news about a new deadly variant hitting the States, he wanted the best mask. It was worth it: you could actually see people's faces and read their expressions; whether they were honest reflections of what they were thinking was another story.

Alby had no idea how old any of these men were—they looked more worn down than old. Lucky had more lines on his face but that could just be the tracks of a tough life. He just wished that the man would stop smiling at him; it was like having a shark stare at a fresh meal.

"Mr. Alby!" Chance yelled, as if they were old friends, waving his hand and giving an annoying almost clown-like smile as he approached the truck. "Not too close," Alby called out. Even with six vaccines, half of which were new, who stood close to anyone these days? Between variants and efficacy curves, you felt like you were just a yard ahead of the Devil.

Lucky swatted Chance away. "You heard the man. He got Pandemic Jitters." Lucky laughed like he had known Alby for years...they had met once. Alby pointed to his mask, and they nodded and put theirs on; all had the cheapest ones, and Chance's had deep grey sweat stains. Alby rolled his window down halfway. Since everyone had a smartphone and his wasn't going off with the Covid Tracer alert, they had to be vaxxed. Or they could have had their phones hacked. Unconsciously, he adjusted

his plastimask. He watched in the rear view mirror as the three of them climbed into the bed of the truck.

Alby felt good as he drove over to the bank; the job foreman, Fat Joe, had already faked all the paperwork and licenses needed to work on such a hazardous site. Of course, Alby didn't mention he was skimming twenty percent off the top of their four nights of graveyard shift work. From the looks of Camden, any money was good money. For Alby, it was all about getting fix-it jobs and keeping as busy as possible, which was tough with this hot-and-cold, open-and-shut, economy.

When they got to the bank, it surprised him to see the usually nondescript, square, four-story building turned into a full-fledged job site. The normally jet-black building was dressed in white. It was a scene caught in frantic motion—klieg lights, trucks, dumpsters, barrels, men in hazmat suits streaming into the building. Large translucent sheets of plastic fell from the roof over the windows and covered about a third of the exterior. Alby pulled his truck alongside the trailers where Fat Joe, his pear-shaped body swiveling around, mask hanging off each ear, pants hanging loose on his short body, sat on the steps outside his trailer. He shouted at Alby. "Drop them by the front door; the inspector will take it from there."

After he did that, Alby parked and walked up to the trailer. Taped to the door was a piece of paper with sloppy block letters in black marker on it: LIMIT TO 5 PEOPLE AT A TIME. Alby checked his plastimask. Last time he was here, Fat Joe hadn't worn a mask the whole time. Again, the tracer alert in his phone didn't go off; but if there were clear signs of a non-vaxxer, Fat Joe wore them loudly.

Alby knocked, walked in, and without asking stood on the faded red masking tape "X" that was about eight feet from Fat Joe's beaten metal desk. Alby positioned himself one foot to the left of the tape. "Paperwork all good?" Fat Joe's mask was crumpled on his desk next to a Bluetooth thermometer. Alby could see marks on the handle from greasy hands.

"More phony vaxxers from what I see. But I made it work; they're certified now! They're in a containment suit all night, so whatever. They're breathing their own air—they can make themselves sick!" He laughed. Alby winced. It sounded like glass in a garbage disposal. "That'd be a pub-

lic service.” Laugh over, he got a serious look on his face. “If I wasn’t short on this job, I wouldn’t even let you on this lot. Damn Infrastructure Bill hired all the good people.”

“What time am I back?” Alby knew better than to engage with bullies.

“Six a.m.,” said Fat Joe with a sigh. “Six goddamned a.m.” He yanked his buckle on his worn-out leather belt as if bracing himself for the long night. Fat Joe had an ugly mouth, resembling more a grouper fish than a human. On his desk he had a cardboard box filled with the basic cloth masks, clearly not bothering with the newer ones, like his. The plastimask was a huge hit that combined cloth and plastic, comfortable and even fashionable. Warby Parker, working with Stanford Hospital and industrial designers, had copped a fortune making masks that were good-looking, safe, and focused on letting people see each other’s mouths. It took the mental edge off hesitating and putting on a mask, a signal some people did not like. But the speed of the mechanism was so fast, that if you felt unsafe, a second later you weren’t. With all the mask-wearing guidelines constantly shifting, the speed made all situations easy to deal with and make the judgement call. And it didn’t fog up ever.

Alby hurried back to his truck; time for some take-out and Maker’s.



While Fat Joe tried to stay awake at his desk in the trailer, inside the bank on the second floor, three men moved very slowly in their white hazmat suits, oxygen tanks on their backs. They looked like astronauts from a 1950s sci-fi movie. A fourth man stood, clipboard in hand, watching them work. The air ventilating machine that stood in the center of the room was meant to catch any loose fibers; it looked like a squat, square robot with a large mouth that acted like a vacuum, sucking anything the long, snaking tube could catch and blow into a sealed mylar bag attached to the machine. The ventilator vacuum emitted a slow, high pitch sound, like a child’s long wail.

Before every shift, Fat Joe would gather the men and give the same speech. He called it his “safety speech”: “One feather can kill you. One thread. One bad hose. One less-than-an-inch per pound of suction. Don’t mess with it. Don’t touch the equipment. You’re dead if you do. I wouldn’t give a shit, but the lawyers are like vultures and they smell stupid from way off. Don’t be stupid.”

Few of these men believed it. They had all seen the lawyer ads on TV for asbestos exposure for years. And Fat Joe knew it. But he also figured that half of these guys working here weren’t even vaxxed but had their phones hacked to show they were. So he wasn’t going to lose any sleep worrying about their health... he just wanted no worries about lawyers, so he harped on them about it.

Lucky heard the speech and had to hold back his usual barking laugh of disdain: asbestos was just another White Man scheme. But he had other things on his mind. He believed the “safety speech” was Fat Joe trying to keep them from stealing stuff from the offices—the only reason he had taken the job in the first place.

Back in the sealed room it was hot and noisy. Using a small garden shovel, they each dug their gloved hands into the soft material and scooped the asbestos away from the pipe, shaving it like sheep’s wool, tiny fibers flying off each chunk. Like tiny feathers, they would start floating free, then got sucked into the black hole of the air purifier vacuum. The men dumped their work into a plastic bag with a small puddle of water in the bottom. The inspector moved around the room looking bored—well, walking like he was bored—you couldn’t see his face with the mask and helmet on.

In a large conference room, Lucky held a mushy handful of asbestos-laden fire retardant pulled from an overhead pipe. In his large clumsy gloves, he twisted it between his hands like cookie dough.

“This shit looks like cotton candy, only rotten,” he yelled out. But with the sounds of his oxygen system and the ventilator in the room, his words rang loudly as an echo inside his hazmat suit.

For hours, the three of them had been slowly yanking, pulling, and bagging the asbestos: methodically they tugged and ripped, gloves digging into the soft material from the ceiling crawl space—then knotting

and taping shut the bags, rinsing any extra dust off the bags in the sealed shower before handing them to guys who just put them in a barrel and rolled them outside on a dolly. Lucky had ordered Chance to do the barrel work.

Even in the uniformly made white hazmat suits, each of the three men looked different. Lucky stood tallest; the suit hung off him like some poorly chosen clown outfit. He seemed to whip and jerk in his suit like he was hunting the asbestos, chasing it with a natural ferocity. Darnell was the exact opposite—slow and methodical, yanking off material in nice rectangular patterns, staring at it before he dropped it in his bag. Chance was like a white-suited twitch, moving from here to there, no rhyme or rhythm, no pattern. Occasionally, Lucky saw the inspector motion for Darnell to focus on one area; the guy knew to keep clear of Lucky.

Since shouting only worked when you were close, everyone used simple hand gestures. The inspector pointed toward his wrist and moved his hand to his mouth several times through the face shield then held up one finger.

One a.m. Lunch break.

The inspector moved into the shower chamber as fast as he could, clearly trying to get away from the crew. Lucky grabbed the arms of Darnell and Chance and mouthed the word “wait” through the clear face mask. A minute later, Lucky jerked his head and they followed him out of the sealed chamber. Without bothering to rinse off, they each stepped through into the hallway outside the office they were working in.

Lucky unzipped his helmet and said loudly: “Let’s get to it. You see this room? There’s got to be stuff everywhere.”

“Nah,” said Darnell, keeping his head gear on, “I saw the sign downstairs in the lobby. The executive offices are upstairs on four. We gotta go there. We gotta walk to go there,” he reminded them. “No elevator powered on.” He paused, “You wearing a mask at all?”

“Yeah, I’m wearing a mask, you dumb motherfucker.” Lucky pulled out one of those cheap blue hospital masks but ignored the hazmat helmet—the pale blue had gone grey from overuse, just like the one Alby had seen on Chance’s face hours before.

When Alby asked Lucky to find two other guys, it had been easy; Lucky picked Darnell because he was smart. He'd done his time, avoided a third strike, and had stayed straight for almost ten years. Lucky knew he had a new woman and needed money. Sometimes you need brains. Picking Chance was easy, too; he was always hanging around Lucky and he was pretty stupid. Lucky was sure he'd be able to get part of his pay from him. Sometimes you need dumb loyalty. Chance had had Covid twice and survived and was still not vaccinated—he was just dumb and blessed. And he'd thought that Chance's being a white guy might make Alby more likely to hire them.

At the stairs, Lucky waited, then gestured for the others to follow him up. The three moved to the stairwell to walk slowly to the fourth floor. Not quite sure what he was looking for, Lucky just trusted that his instincts would lead him to something valuable.

The floor was half-prepped with plastic. Fat Joe had made it clear that this weekend was for the first two floors: next weekend, they'd be on floors three and four. Fat Joe spoke to them like they were all idiots. But Lucky was a good listener; remembering the small stuff was a survival technique that had served him well.

After the blasting noise of the first two floors, in its absence, Lucky realized that his ears ached. He moved past some offices and approached a door with a nameplate. He took off his helmet and pressed the protective plastic against the surface to reveal the embossed gold letters of a name: Joseph Kurtz, Executive Vice President. Chance, mimicked Lucky and took off his helmet. Darnell looked at them both with an expression that said he was looking at two of the stupidest people on Earth, but said nothing.

Lucky went in first and stumbled on a roll of plastic sheeting. Falling forward, his extended arm ripped through the plastic, exposing a wood-paneled office wall. Instead of pulling back, he paused, and used his arm to push down farther in and slice the plastic although it took some effort. The plastic was thick and resistant to tearing. Then, using both hands, he opened the sheet like a surgeon and stared intently for a good ten seconds. "Shit. I guess if we're gonna take anything, now's the time."

Lucky smirked and went to the ripped plastic and peered through. Chance grabbed Darnell's shoulder and was pulling him over to stand near Lucky looking at the ripped plastic. "We are screwed," he yelled.

"Nah, we use the electric tape, and no one'll know. Anyway, the way this job is run, no one's smart enough to look." Lucky nodded, as if affirming what he had just said. His entire expression changed.

"We got us some shopping to do," Lucky said with glee. "Look for desks, places with drawers we can check out."

Darnell took a step back and glanced nervously around. Chance was quick to nod his agreement. Darnell clearly felt very differently. Speaking loudly, he said, "I don't know. I'm kind of thinkin' we should go get lunch. Lucky, this is trouble—trouble we don't need. My third strike. I'm not comin' out."

"Shut the fuck up, Darnell. You knew that comin' in. Find some tape," he ordered, starting to size up the rip. He slipped two hands into the plastic and spread it open like it was a piece of rotted flesh, and it ripped more.

"Aw, Lucky, no more, man."

Lucky reached in and pulled out a large, expensive-looking silver frame holding a photo of a smiling family. The three men looked at it, expressionless. Lucky put it back through the plastic sheet, and they heard a smashing sound of glass breaking. He reached in with both hands, then extracted the empty silver frame and handed it to Darnell. "Just a little gift!" he laughed.

Chance leaned in. "Big bucks for this." Lucky cast a skeptical eye at him. This was all pocket change; he needed something of real value. "There's a bigger desk over here." He pointed as he squinted through the slit in the translucent plastic.

Darnell looked even more worried now and kept glancing at the double plastic containers ready for use that framed the doorway into the room. "You two better put your helmets back on. You'll get that nasty meso-themiola, or whatever it is."

Lucky wasn't listening. As he tugged at the sheet to get it out of the way, he reached through to get some leverage, leaning against the wall.

But his hand slipped, then found something to grab onto. It was a handle. Slowly he folded back the split sheet.

A safe. It was a wall safe; he'd never seen one except in old movies his dad had made him watch. He reached in and slowly took hold of the handle, which faced upwards. Locked, he thought, as he turned the handle to the right. It didn't budge, like he expected. He exhaled loudly; it was like losing a scratch Lotto ticket, you just had to let it go. As an afterthought, Lucky turned it left. It moved. He yanked it down, and the small door swung open.

The other two men stepped closer, crowding him; Lucky brushed them back. He reached into the safe. Slowly, his hand, made clumsy by the puffy gloves, fumbled until he withdrew one piece of rectangular paper...

Where the hell is this going?

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