

ONE



*C*lick. It's over in a second and hardly makes a sound, not that I'm there to hear it. While the photo that will torpedo my engagement is snapped at a music festival outside LA, I'm in Las Vegas, mindlessly scrolling social media to kill time during yet another glacially slow day at work. As if fated, that's when the sponsored job advertisement first pops up in my feed.

Seeking Bearer of Bad News!!

The two exclamation points reek of desperation, and the generic sunset profile photo screams either scam or retiree. Nonetheless, the ad intrigues.

Seeking a professional BOBN to deliver an account of a certain misadventure to my estranged sister, early 40s, last known whereabouts in the Italian Dolomites. All expenses paid to find her and convey said bad news. Generous per diem and \$25,000 success fee. Experience with complex family dynamics and immediate availability preferred. Please apply via DM.

Complex family dynamics and a \$25,000 success fee? I'm bored enough to journey down the rabbit hole—I haven't had a client all afternoon—but just then a mousy woman with a puckered expression and large sunglasses ducks into the strip-mall cubicle I euphemistically call a salon. She hesitates

before asking for blond highlights, eyeing the cracked linoleum and bright pink walls that aspire to cheerful but achieve Pepto Bismol.

I want to say something reassuring, but the truth is that whether from lack of natural talent (my suspicion) or because you can't be good at something you don't particularly enjoy (my best friend Adam's theory), I remain a mediocre hairstylist. Still, it pays the bills until I find a better fit, especially while Julian isn't working. For money, that is—as far as my fiancé is concerned, art is its own reward.

Almost as soon as she sits down and takes off her sunglasses, I realize that the woman, who introduces herself as Vivian, needs a therapist more than a hairdresser. Before I've managed to paint foils on even half her head, I already know that she happened to be passing by my salon while her next-door neighbor, who happens to be an ex, was also passing by. In front of her. But she was not following him because, due to a restraining order, that would be illegal. It would be helpful, Vivian stresses, if I could pretend she had this appointment in advance. Just if anyone asks. Like a parole officer.

Vivian catches my eye in the mirror, and I nod solemnly while making one of the hundreds of noncommittal, oatmeal-bland, could-mean-anything noises that I've mastered to stay afloat in this profession.

"He acts like I've done something crazy, but the apartment freed up fair and square. Is it my fault that it was just what I'd been looking for?" Vivian's eyes bulge to emphasize the injustice of it all. "Really it's just coincidence, don't you think?"

"But you knew he lived next door before you moved in, right?" I try not to sound judgmental.

"I know where lots of people live, Lacey." Vivian's tone drips condescension.

"It's Lucy," I mutter, trying to get through the foils double-time.

"You look nothing like a Lucy." In the mirror, Vivian's expression is piercing. "Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like that old-time movie star, Genevieve Saint?"

"No." I try to keep my voice even. Not even Julian knows that Genevieve Saint is my grandmother. Of course he knows about *a* grandmother who—my mother dead, my father not in the picture—raised me in Switzerland. But her full name never came up, let alone the unforgivable lie that severed our relationship.

I lower my head but can feel Vivian's stare dissecting my reflection before her attention shifts to a different topic. "When's the big day?" she asks, her eyes flitting to my engagement ring, which is honestly hard to miss.

Julian could afford a large stone because it's fake. We agreed cubic zirconia was the right way to go. Blood diamonds, such a tragedy. Also, cost. I don't say any of this to Vivian. "We haven't set a date," I say.

"Really?" She looks surprised. "Did you just get engaged?"

"About nine months ago." I keep my tone casual, but Vivian's eyebrows climb into her hairline. "We'll set a date soon," I reassure her. "It's just that Julian is in the middle of a career change, and weddings are expensive."

Vivian still looks skeptical.

"His parents are super Catholic," I rush to add. "So we have to do Pre-Cana classes and book the church—it's quite involved."

Obviously unconvinced, Vivian makes her own oatmeal noise. "Have you been together long?"

"Almost four years." I don't mention that for two of those years Julian was in the Peace Corps in Senegal. We met at a retro dance party at the University of Nevada, Reno, coming together to Madonna's "Vogue," all hand gestures and gyration. I had felt confident. I had felt beautiful. I had *been* beautiful. With him. Julian had that effect on me.

"And you're only now getting engaged?" Vivian says. "Seems like a lot of red flags."

I open my mouth and then close it again, forcing a tight smile. A woman with a restraining order actively stalking her ex is telling me that *my* relationship has red flags?

In the mirror, Vivian's eyes narrow. I brace myself for another question about my engagement, but instead she says, "You know, plastic surgery has

come a long way in the last few years.” Her tone is offhand, as if commenting on whether peaches are in season.

The abrupt change of subject is unnerving. The crescent of burned flesh that curls underneath my chin and toward my left ear starts to itch, but with my hands fully occupied, I can’t smooth my hair back over my jaw. Twenty-two years, three plastic surgeries, and countless laser treatments have not fully erased the scar I’ve had since the age of four, nor my self-consciousness.

Seemingly oblivious to my discomfort, Vivian prattles on about a friend whose face had been nearly ripped off by a Rottweiler and the miracles a doctor from Brazil had wrought with illegal stem cells and a mafia-subsidized lab outside of Rio.

“Medicine isn’t regulated there,” Vivian says. “The fact that she still has a face shows what’s possible when the government stays out of it.”

“But does her face”—I pause diplomatically—“*work?*” I try and fail to picture the mechanics of little cells magically conjoining like organic duct tape.

Vivian quirks an eyebrow, as if considering the question. “She’ll always drink her meals through a straw. But on the other hand”—her tone turns snide—“she has very little scarring.”

The smell of bleach burns my lungs. I deeply regret that I’ve already done my best with Vivian’s highlights. They look almost right, which is as good as it gets for my clients.

Also, I steal things, which is how I come to possess a pack of gum from Vivian’s purse. But I never thief unprovoked, and Vivian certainly had it coming after she followed her barbed commentary with the further offenses of no tip or thanks. Even so, I smile with fake warmth and wish her a nice day (of stalking). On her way out, she does in fact look around hopefully, as if her ex/neighbor might still be in the vicinity.

When Vivian is out of sight, I toss the gum into the trash. The things I steal are never valuable enough to miss, and I never keep them for long in case the police come knocking to see what I know about that missing hotel pen, hair clip, lipstick, roll of breath mints, or whatnot.

These are the rules that Adam set for me years ago, after I was nearly expelled from our New England boarding school. When we met in ninth grade, Adam was always dressed in shocking plaids and neon, and I was the awkward kid with the scarred face. We bonded as fellow social pariahs and foreign students—me from Switzerland and him from Uganda—who were both unappreciated and ahead of our time.

My first ill-fated foray into theft was taking an ugly charm bracelet from Madeline, who was not unlike Vivian in lobbing double-edged comments that exploded like hand grenades. With her perfect skin and cupid's-bow mouth, Madeline delighted in whispering about us to her gaggle of friends. Like synchronized swimmers, they would crane their necks to laugh in our direction, gazes scorching like an acid bath.

Without Adam's rules to guide me, I was easily caught. Madeline's charm bracelet, which turned out to be an heirloom, was discovered by the dorm master in my desk. But I was able to boo-hoo my way out of it. Dead mother, facial disfigurement, you get the picture.

Those days are long past, the little voice in my head (or Little Voice, as I have come to think of her) reminds me soothingly, even though we both know my teenage foibles and insecurities still lurk beneath the surface like bog monsters.

Shaking off the negativity of the last few hours, I emerge from the salon just as day softens into twilight, neon lights sparking to life all around me. Even in early May, the temperatures are already peaking in the eighties. The air is a warm embrace, the dry heat pleasurable and entirely unlike the alpine climate of my childhood.

Opting for the long route home, I turn onto the Strip for the distraction of the glam and grit out on parade. Las Vegas is the Zsa Zsa Gabor of cities—too sparkly and brazen for the occasion but hypnotizing all the same. I pass by a woman carrying a teacup dog in a baby sling, both in matching straw hats. Tourists in sneakers and yoga pants clutch smartphones as they snap pictures of fake world landmarks and erupting fountains in rainbow colors. Near the nicer casinos, I move into a riot of high-heeled, gold-chained,

fake- and real-Rolaxed bling that advertises readiness for a What-Happens-in-Vegas-Stays-in-Vegas Saturday night.

My street brings a seedier array of sights. A convenience store and pawn shop. A woman with a vacant stare walking a lunging Doberman. A leering man in a beret and velvet pants. I take out my phone to look occupied. Sometime during my interminable hours with Vivian, I've missed a call from Julian. I play the voicemail immediately.

"Hey, babe, my work trip is going better than expected." Referring to these LA audition weekends as "work trips" when Julian has never made a penny acting is what he calls visualizing success. To be supportive, I play along.

And Julian has gotten closer to a big break. Just last month, he went viral for his role in a dog-food commercial where he and a Great Dane barked in tandem to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." Coined "Hot Dog Guy" by the gods of TikTok, Julian's sort-of big break was overshadowed by his questionable decision to accept payment in a cryptocurrency that we had neither heard of nor managed to access. That's show business.

"They asked me in for a callback Monday, or maybe even Tuesday," the voicemail continues. "Depends on the director's schedule, but I'll be here for a few extra nights." He ends the message in the unoriginally coded way we always say *I love you*: "Sending three."

Disappointed I won't see him tonight as planned, I remind myself that this is why we packed up our life in Reno six months ago and moved to Vegas in the first place. With my Nevada cosmetology license, this was the closest we could get to LA after Julian had a revelation that his calling was not his solid job in accounting but rather life on the big screen. The things we do for the people we love.

Completely oblivious of what's to come, I text Julian a heart emoji before fumbling for the keyless entry fob that unlocks the front door to our loft apartment. Living here wasn't my top choice. A so-called luxury building in an otherwise dodgy neighborhood, its amenities are little more than bells and whistles. Growing up with Grandmother, who found four-star hotels rather shabby, I would know.

“It’s like the glitchy spaceship those galactic movie characters are always forced to buy after they escape a kidnapping,” I’d told Adam after the viewing.

“Don’t you get veto power if you’re the one signing the lease?” Adam asked.

This was a fair point—Julian’s credit was shot, so our first shared apartment would be in my name only—but Julian had been so excited about the apartment that I hadn’t wanted to be a wet blanket. Plus, I’d assumed it was out of our price range. Only it turned out to be barely affordable because not everyone wants to talk to their appliances.

Inside the robot apartment I now call home, I kick off my shoes. The lights are operated by a shoddy voice-command system, but I rarely bother as it’s never really dark. Rumor has it that keeping all twelve million lights on the Strip illuminated makes it the most expensive attraction in the world. Living close enough to bathe in the ambient glow, potent despite the barrier of cheap IKEA curtains and the building across the street that blocks any view of the lights themselves, I believe it.

The space is sparsely furnished. A flimsy leaf-patterned privacy screen sections off the bedroom area in a way that I’d hoped would evoke elegance but is more reminiscent of a garage sale, which is indeed where we bought it. Other than that, there is an elephantine living room couch, left by the previous tenant because it was too big to get out the door (how it arrived is anyone’s guess), and a huge television that Julian bought over my objection that we couldn’t afford it.

I’m glad I lost that fight because it’s my only friend most nights. Tonight won’t be an exception, though maybe there will be a small cheese pizza in my future to spice up the evening. In anticipation, I flop down on the couch and take out my phone to order.

It’s only then that I see the SOS CALL ME!!!! text from Adam.

“Didn’t you see my missed calls?” he demands, his aggrieved face filling my phone screen. Video calls have become our thing since the move.

Distracted by Julian’s voicemail, I hadn’t. I start to tell him about

Vivian's semi-successful highlights and restraining order (no way will I fess up to the stolen gum), but he cuts me off.

"Is Julian off auditioning?"

"Yep."

"Another dog-food commercial? He'd be perfect as the dog."

"Very funny." Adam hasn't been a fan of Julian since the move, even less so as the audition weekends have increased in frequency.

"I'm not kidding," Adam says. "There's—"

He changes phone angles, and I get an unobstructed view of his ugly reindeer sweater. "Why are you dressed for Christmas in May?" I interrupt, partly because the sweater is truly hideous and partly because I don't want to listen to yet another rant about Julian.

"People appreciate that I'm festive year-round." Adam looks down at the googly-eyed reindeer. "My students love this outfit."

"They're six. Not exactly a tough demographic."

"Enough distraction!" Adam holds up a stern hand in traffic-cop fashion. "Did you not see the SOS?"

"Oh, right. SOS." I try to look appropriately receptive to the forthcoming bad news, though Adam's SOS texts have sometimes been about Whole Foods running out of hummus.

"I'm going to send you a picture Maurice sent me—"

"You and Maurice are texting now?" I try to keep the amusement out of my voice. Until Adam recently developed a crush, Maurice was more my friend than his. My old debate partner from college, Maurice had fallen out of touch when he joined the Navy SEALs and did a bunch of top-secret stuff before moving back to Reno last year and reentering our lives (and Adam's heart). For his part, Maurice seems oblivious to Adam's feelings, which doesn't speak well for his spycraft since Adam is about as subtle as a nuclear bomb.

"Yes, we text, but that's hardly the point."

"Fine, what is the point?"

"Do you remember Mr. Chippy?"

“From the Laughtacular?” When Julian first decided he wanted to be an actor, Adam had invited him to join his amateur improv class, and the resulting Laughtacular Showcase was hands down one of the most painful three-hour periods of my life. “Didn’t he move to Los Angeles?”

Adam nods his head, looking near to tears. At least now I know where this is going. Aksel Larsen, the statuesque Norwegian who bravely took on the role of Mr. Chippy the talking squirrel, had been the object of Adam’s unrequited love for the entirety of *Improv Secrets* 101.

“I am a better friend to you than Maurice.” Adam fans his face. “He sent me the picture because he knew I would do what had to be done, that bastard.”

“Can we speed this up? I was about to order a pizza.”

“Pizza won’t fix this.” Adam shakes his head sadly. “I’m going to forward what he sent me, but you need to promise not to freak out.”

“Okay,” I lie. I am fully prepared to freak out, if only to show solidarity with Adam for whatever his ex-crush Mr. Chippy has done now. But when Adam sends through the photo, I only squint. All I can make out is a passionate embrace between two men. Tousled hair, exposed skin, a surprising amount of glitter . . . but that could be the lighting.

“It’s from a music festival earlier today. Maurice was there. He took this photo.”

“On the bright side, you were right that Aksel’s into guys.” I focus on the positive.

“Can you not see who he’s kissing?” Adam looks close to stroking out.

I continue to squint. “Lights on,” I call. Despite my command, the room stays dark.

“Forget about the lights!”

“Lights on!” I try one more time. In the kitchen, the garbage disposal starts to whirl. “This place! It’s like living in the opening scene of a slasher movie—”

“Zoom. In. On. The. Photo.” Adam’s tone is ominous.

With my thumb and forefinger, I enlarge the couple. Eyes closed,

expression rapturous, features partially obscured by a baseball hat but—and now it's obvious—so very familiar. And then I freak out.

“Is that—”

“Yes.” Adam hisses the word like he's auditioning for the role of an evil wizard.

“Why is Julian kissing Aksel Larsen?” I try to keep hysteria at bay. Probably my first thought should have been one of outrage, but instead I find myself wondering: *Has Julian ever kissed me that way?*

“Oh, honey.” Adam's tone is tragic. “Who wouldn't kiss Aksel Larsen?”

Wasserman Bosch Attorneys
Basel, Switzerland
December 18, 1981

Dear Ms. Saint,

As discussed in our meeting last week, I have made discreet inquiries regarding your situation. If you are amenable, I suggest that you—or I on your behalf—reach out to the Department of Lost Things. This institution may be unknown to you, as it is to most, but through various government contacts, I have confirmed that the organization does the quiet work you seek.

To allay your concerns about legitimacy, permit me to recount what I have learned. Most agree that rumors of the Department existing unofficially prior to World War II are unsupported. Officially, the Department was founded in 1942 as an intergovernmental effort, much like the tribunals later established to prosecute war crimes. Though its later evolution is not publicly known, my sources believe that the Department ended up privately funded and populated by agents of government entities around the world. As a testament to the work undertaken, it is rumored that at least some of these agents volunteer their time without compensation or their governments' knowledge or permission.

Despite unusual aspects of its structure (one contact referenced "spies playing Robin Hood"), the Department has historically provided services useful enough to ensure its independence. In many cases, world governments and international institutions cooperate with (and even defer to) the Department. In short, I believe they are best positioned to provide the necessary assistance, though contacting them is not without risk given your situation.

I remain available to further discuss at your convenience. Until then, I wish you and yours joyous holidays.

Sincere regards,
David Bosch
David Bosch
Partner