

**KILL ME**

*A private investigator meets a potential client in a cocktail lounge, not realising their shared history.*

Piotr felt out of place in the cocktail lounge. In his tan jacket and worn jeans he would have been more at ease in a bar with country music and licence plates nailed to the walls. Here, slow jazz rose from a grand piano, and the plush black carpet featured an art deco gilding. The other patrons huddled around tasselled table lamps in their dinner suits and evening dresses. Even the bartender wore a tie. Piotr noticed a hint of perfume in the air, too, as though an attractive woman had just passed him by.

A raised hand caught Piotr's eye. Alone in a corner booth sat an older man, his face half covered in shadow.

"You must be my funeral crasher," he said as Piotr slid into the leather seat opposite him.

Piotr studied the man. He had the silver hair of a man wealthy enough not to lose it, and a natural ruddiness to his cheeks. Combined with his rumpled polo shirt, he might have been out sailing all day.

"I'm a private investigator," Piotr corrected, crossing his arms. He wished he had gum to chew. "How did you hear about that other work?"

The man raised a vape to his lips, pushed a gentle stream of smoke into the room. Piotr hated the smell: sickly sweet, like fruit fermenting in the sun. But the hint of tobacco beneath quickened his pulse.

"My sources tell me you attend funerals at the behest of the deceased, interrupting the service to deliver messages from beyond the grave. A letter of confession. Reveal what the deceased really thought of people. I've heard you are the best."

"No client has ever complained." Piotr's face curled into a half smile at his well-worn joke.

The man on the other side of the table smiled too. "Are you armed?"

Piotr uncrossed his arms. He noticed, then, that the cocktail lounge was a breath colder than it should have been. Too like a wine cellar.

"I am licenced to carry a firearm."

"Are you carrying one now?"

The older man had inscrutable eyes, maybe grey or blue, a hint of weariness and sun-quent to them. Piotr pulled back the corner of his jacket to reveal the stubby handle of a pistol.

"Excellent," the man said. "I have many enemies. I want you to apologise to them for me, at my funeral."

"Why not just do it yourself, while you are alive?"

"It is too late for that."

The older man signalled by raising one hand, his wrist dressed in a heritage diving watch that must have been worth more than Piotr's car. A waiter appeared with a silver tray on his fingertips. Beads of water slid down the side of a single Tom Collins.

"How did you know?" Piotr asked, inclining his unshaven face toward the drink. "Did you hire a PI to learn your PI's favourite drink?"

The older man ignored the comment. “In addition to apologising to those I have wronged, I want you to attend to some affairs. There are people who need to be looked after.”

Piotr let his fingers touch the glass, but he didn’t pick it up. “Why not just get a lawyer, and a will?”

“Because I am a criminal.”

The older man blew a plume of vape smoke, lofting it into the space between them. Piotr would have killed for a cigarette. It had taken all of his strength to best alcohol and tobacco, after his wife’s death.

“When do you need me?” Piotr said. “You don’t look sick.”

“I will be dead soon, I assure you. Like I said, I have many enemies.”

“You are aware of my fee?”

The man signalled once more. This time the waiter brought a suitcase, placing it squarely on the table. Piotr clicked the clasps to reveal stacks of bank-banded hundred-dollar notes.

“After apologising at my funeral,” the older man said. “I want you to distribute my money to the people I have harmed. What remains is yours.”

Piotr’s eyes stayed on the cash. The notes looked new, crisp. He shut the briefcase. “What sort of criminal are you?”

“We’ll get to that. But first, there is one more thing I must ask you to do.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to kill me.”

The cocktail lounge seemed to hush. Piotr glanced around, but the other patrons remained engrossed in their murmured conversations. The pianist’s eyes never raised as he tinkled the keys.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Piotr said.

The older man placed his vape on the glass tabletop. He was suddenly very serious. “You will. As I have said, my work has made me many enemies. I prefer to choose the time and place of my death.”

Piotr felt a discomfort rising in his chest.

“You asked before what sort of criminal I am,” the older man continued. “I am the worst kind. I steal from the poor and tell myself it is victimless. You would not find one person on the street who did not consider me despicable. Have you heard of Herbalux?”

Piotr’s breath shallowed.

“I know you have. It has been described as a pyramid scheme, a scam. I am not offended by these labels. It has made me rich.”

Piotr was gripping his untouched Tom Collins so tightly it threatened to pop from his grasp like a bar of soap. “Scum.”

“We’ll get to that. If my crimes were only that I would have no qualms. People who bought in were motivated by greed.”

“They are still people.”

“Yes, but that is not my concern. My regret is my product. My supplements. Mostly ineffective, mostly harmless. But I cut corners. Cheapest manufacturer I could find, in Indonesia. There was a bad batch. Some people died.”

“You bastard.”

“That batch, it was contaminated with arsenic from a nearby timber treatment plant. Tasteless, odorless. People took those pills hoping to get better, and they got much worse. Swollen skin. Abdominal pain. Vomiting. Do these symptoms sound familiar?”

All colour had leached from Piotr’s world. The cocktail lounge had become a scene from a 1920s movie: black and white.

And red.

The older man continued. “It must have been hard, watching your wife suffer, not knowing how serious it all was. You had a living room stacked with unsellable vitamin boxes, you were worrying about how you were going to afford a breast pump, a change table. You had no idea if her symptoms were normal for a first pregnancy. No idea why the colour was going from her skin, why she couldn’t eat. Eventually you took her to the hospital. Neither she nor your baby ever came home.”

Iron and bile filled Piotr’s throat. The tastes from back then, coming back. His whole body was shaking.

“I want you to kill me, Piotr. Do what is right. Make my apologies at my funeral, then share my money among the victims.”

Piotr hadn’t realised he was standing. His manic eyes twitched around the cocktail lounge. All the other tables were empty. The bartender was nowhere to be seen.

“This is my bar. Everything is arranged.” The older man leaned forward, grave. “I deserve this. Your wife deserves it.”

Piotr’s oily brute of a gun was throbbing in his hand. The barrel raised itself to the older man’s forehead.

“Thank you,” whispered the older man.