

“I met him at the circus,” Sabina Carter said, her voice low enough to keep it from carrying over the cube walls of her office.

“I can’t believe you, Sabina. Weren’t you with Paul?” Wendy’s quick, indignant voice snapped back over the line.

“Yes, he finally agreed to go with me, but...”

“But you just took off with some other guy? After you forced Paul to take you to that freaky circus? That’s not what we said you were going to do. What happened to new Sabina? What happened to battening down our hatches?”

“Stop it, Wendy,” Sabina whisper-yelled into the receiver even though her lips opened to a white-toothed smile. “It’s not like that. *He* picked *me* out of the audience.” She waited for a response but the other voice was dead in anticipation. Sabina closed her eyes. “He was the knife-thrower.”

“What?” Wendy said, choking on the hatches that had just been torn off their hinges.

“His name’s Lyle Vargas. He picked me out of the audience to help me with his act. Wendy, it was so unbelievable.” Sabina could hear her voice rushing.

“Oh, Sabina. There is no hope for you,” Wendy said flatly before she downshifted her tone right into a low gossip hush. “Is he good looking? How did you give him your number, with Paul there, I mean ...”

“It was the best part. He accidentally cut some of my hair during the show.”

“Oh my God! With the knife?”

“Yes, it missed me by a few inches,” Sabina remembered with excitement in her voice, “He insisted he pay for a new haircut. So we exchanged numbers.”

“I’m done with you. Some circus-man almost kills you and you like him better than a junior V.P. of marketing. A junior V.P. that’s ready to put up with your not so minor insanity.”

“I don’t care. I’m going out with him tonight,” Sabina’s voice rang with an uncanny confidence, as she played with a single short lock of dark hair that hung from her temple.”

“With the knife-thrower?” Wendy tried slowly.

“Yes.”

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“Is that my Lucky Lyle actually practicing?” Jean Bazsinger called through the empty auditorium. Lyle fired six knives across the length of the stage. Each stuck soundly into the cherry wood plank.

“I don’t believe it.” Jean’s two brothers chided in unison.

“I thought Luck never needed practice,” Ren Bazsinger jeered as the trio of clowns ambled down the aisle. Lyle retrieved the blades and returned to a small “X” he’d taped to the floor.

Ralph, the youngest of the Bazsinger brothers, strode up to lean his fat elbows on the stage. “Maybe when your luck goes bad, you have to rely on actual work again.”

Without moving his head, Lyle’s left, hazel eye inched impossibly over to the extreme corner of his face. He suddenly looked like a cubist profile, while he held Ralph captive with his unworldly gaze. Without breaking the stare, Lyle snapped his wrist six times and all half-dozen knives bore into the tiny red heart he’d painted on the cherry board.

“There is the Crocodile Eye for you,” Lyle said, letting his head finally turn in the direction of his eyes.

It was a trick from way back. A kind of vintage feat used to audition in the early days of the traveling circus. It was too subtle for a real audience but Ralph recognized it and threw up his hands in defeat. He paced back to where his brothers were changing. “You’re telling us your little mishap yesterday was no mistake, eh?” He called over his shoulder while fitting an oversized red shoe onto his foot.

“Maybe it was the hairstyle?” his brother quipped.

“Or maybe he just wanted to give her a good trim?” Jean chimed in, mocking a Groucho cigar flick and eyebrow flare. All three clowns laughed.

Lyle just smiled lopsided and retrieved his knives from the gouged heart.

“Don’t keep us in the dark, Crocodile. Will this fine audience member be making our Lyle lucky again?” Ralph leered playfully.

Lyle fired one blade sidearm.

“Well, I did get her number.”

And a second.

“I told her I wanted to buy her a fix-up job.”

The third knife sunk into the wood.

“So, tonight, we are just going for a haircut.”

Lyle let go of the last three knives quick. The target was left adorned by symmetrical smiling face.

“A haircut and then dinner at Le Circe.”

The clowns’ laughter filled the theater in a storm, and Lyle laughed with them.

“One in every port, I swear.” Ralph threw up his hands again.

“When did we join the Navy? And how come I’m never the happy sailor?” Ren groaned.

“That is why they call me Lucky,” Lyle’s full smile was a sharp “V” on his long, thin face. His white teeth clashed with his dark complexion under the stage light.

“No. We call you Lucky cause you don’t miss. Everybody else calls you Lyle the Crocodile,” Jean said somberly, ending the air of jest.

“Oh Jean, don’t step on the poor boy,” Ren yawned and started to stretch. “He’s got so many names I can’t remember them all.”

“Remember the woman in Romania? I don’t even know what names she was screaming at you, Lyle.” Ralph started up again. He and Ren laughed but they were short by two. Lyle and Jean were busy sizing up each other’s purposeful expressions.

“Something to say for yourself, Crocodile?” Jean said, drawn in by the stare. Lyle cocked an eyebrow and ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. Ren and Ralph perked up immediately when they realized their brother’s question had struck a nerve.

“All right, I know this isn’t the usual crocodile story,” Lyle began, pacing the stage like he was performing. “But I see her in the audience, and I’m impressed with everything but the guy she’s with.”

“Yeah, yuppie trash,” Ren confirmed.

“So I figure, ‘what the Hell?’ I get her up on stage. But when I take her hand to lead her, it’s as steady as a surgeon’s. Not one drop of stage fright. Then, I set her up with the pineapple and when I turn around, the look in her eyes ...”

“Mr. Vargas!” Esteban Tuck sauntered on wide, stumpy legs from the wings to center stage, willfully oblivious to his interruption. His thick black beard matched the

fine suit that was stretched over his round back. “Insurance, Lyle.” Esteban’s voice was full with bravado. “That is what it comes down to. I know it. You know it. I think we both know it. Insurance.”

The brothers grimaced at Esteban’s familiar and laborious way of speaking, but they were to smart too crack wise out in the open. Lyle could barely tolerate Esteban’s grandiose affect even as the second-string ringmaster, but as the troupe’s accountant, his effete tendencies caused an instant migraine. And of course, the bad-blood Esteban never let go after losing an audition to the Crocodile.

“It will never happen again.” Lyle worded flatly, trying to keep things short.

“Of that, I am sure. Because, Lyle, my dear Crocodile, due to the gravity of the event my hand was forced, and I had to contact Mr. Reno. I daresay Mr. Reno was put out. I believe he said, ‘If Lyle can’t control himself he can go back to clowning with the Bazsingers.’” Esteban bared his long teeth, framing them in a square smile. The brothers heard the warning but still restrained themselves. Esteban had proven himself dangerous in the past. There was a family of trapeze artists who’d crossed him, and now they were marooned in the Midwest, running a truck-stop diner.

“Don’t let me curl that mustache anymore,” Lyle said cocking an eyebrow and leveling it into Esteban’s leer. “You won’t need to fill in for me.”

Esteban’s smile fell so fast Lyle was embarrassed how deeply his remark had cut.

“Well, some of us are luckier than others, but I stay in practice.” Esteban’s voice swelled early with pride, but then fell hoarse, baring the childlike jealousy in his heart.

Lyle looked away, and absently examined the knives in his hand. “See you tomorrow, Esteban,” Lyle tried to fill his voice with respect.

The leer snapped back onto Esteban’s face. “Lyle, the wrap party is tonight. Mr. Reno explained last week the attendance is mandatory. I do hope you haven’t made other plans.”

“I’m sure I’ll make it,” Lyle said and turned to walk off the stage.

“Do, Crocodile. Nine sharp.”

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Lyle waited for Sabina at Peretchello’s Salon. While it was a bit past its prime, it was still counted among the most exclusive salons in New York. Nick Peretchello, the

star stylist, had been a clown runaway in 1991. A year before Lyle made his break. He wasn't quite the same story as Lyle, because Nick was running away from a role as the little prince of a family fortune. But Lyle and Nick had still gotten on. The favors between them had been paid and repaid so many times they'd stopped counting.

Sabina stepped tentatively through the front door. The young model attendant dropped her eyes over Sabina's simple black dress and the odd crop in her long brown hair. "Is there something we can do for you?"

Lyle stepped up to the counter with his own sneer on across his face.

"Sabina Carter. She has an appoint with Nick." While the attendant was forced to check the book Lyle greeted Sabina with a broad smile. Sabina found herself giving Lyle a hug hello and Lyle leaned in and stole a kiss on her cheek. The theft was so impulsive Lyle shrank back a little as he got a hold of himself.

"I didn't know this place was so ..." Sabina trailed off, glancing at the attendant.

"It's homier than it seems."

"Lyle!" Nick Peretchello burst from the cutting room with his arms wide open. Nick clapped an embrace on Lyle and then turned to Sabina, "Oh, Bellissimo! What has this monster done to you? Come, I show him how the hair is cut." Nick coaxed Sabina away from the counter, listing the styles he was prepared to "free her hair into." Sabina threw Lyle a nervous smile over her shoulder, but a second later the hesitations and her blue eyes were filled with nothing but confidence. The Crocodile was in trouble. He sat back into one of the waiting room chairs, nervous for the first time in twenty years.

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"Wait, you actually ran away to the circus?" Sabina asked with reverence. She shook her head and Lyle watched the short curls Nick had fashioned sway in the candlelight. Sabina refilled their wine glasses. "God, I always wanted to do something exciting like that, but I thought, you know, that only happened in fables."

"It happens more than you think. My family life wasn't the best thing ever. Dad and five brothers were all cops and wrestling captains, so being a kid interested in school plays pretty much spelled 'G-A-Y'. Things got a little rough for me until I caught the Reno & Maynard Circus in '85."

"And you just became the knife-thrower?" Sabina asked beaming.

“Not at first. Did clowning first and learned juggling, knife throwing and a little acrobatic stuff later. I switched over totally in '90. Nobody likes a knife-throwing clown.” Lyle and Sabina laughed together.

“That’s just an amazing story, Lyle. I’d love to write it.”

“You write?”

“On the side. Doing odd jobs to support myself.”

“Well, I’m sure circus life would make a good story. I mean I’ve taken plenty of missteps with some of the strange characters I’ve met. Either from town to town or right in your own troupe.”

“I’d love to travel around like that. My pen is at its best while traveling.”

“Well, you should come be my assistant.” Lyle said flatly. And in the next instant Sabina and Lyle panicked at opposite ends of their dinner. The assertion was so outlandish, so inappropriate between acquaintances, and such a strange admission of shared fantasy, that Lyle and Sabina were silent while each wagered the other would break the moment with a joke.

Lyle inhaled to get a good-hearted chuckle ready but said, “You could do it easily. When we went that first time, I could tell in your eyes. You were so, so confident. So hungry for the adventure of it. That’s just how I was.” Lyle reached instinctively for more wine to drown out his words.

“What would I have to do?” Sabina spoke over the kettledrum beat of her heart.

“Trust me.” Lyle put down his glass, dropped some money on the table, and left with Sabina out into the night.

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At first glance, the cocktail dresses, the suits and ties, the whole merry opulence that filled the Puck’s main ballroom could have been any social gathering in New York. But as Sabina and Lyle slipped toward the main bar, Sabina realized it was like no office happy hour she’d ever been to. In the corners, groups of midgets were huddled up smoking cigars larger than their fingers. The women, the full-sized ones, were still on the small side - with fine-tuned bodies and rippling shoulders. Their dresses were all expensive, flimsy things that hugged their bodies at haphazard places. Edges of their tattoos slithered from beneath. The men came in three varieties: young, in metallic shirts.

Mature, with mismatched suits and painful, paisley ties. And old, with cable-knit sweaters and handlebar mustaches.

As Lyle ordered drinks, Sabina heard the rustle of urgent whispering that was unmistakably the stirred embers of gossip. She turned to catch three sinuous women examining her with gypsy eyes. They all wore huge hoop earrings. Sabina remembered one of the women from the contortionist act she'd seen at the circus the night before. Lyle turned and sighed at the inevitability of it all. Sabina clenched her jaw.

“Are these some of your ‘missteps’ Lyle?” Sabina said, trying to keep her tone playful.

“Did their cackling give it away?”

“Quite.” Sabina chuckled while the three women paced up to her.

“Who is this gorgeous young thing, Lyle?” The contortionist asked through a thick Russian accent.

“Sabina, this is Marta, Lynne, and Frida.”

“Charmed,” the three women said in eager unison.

“Mr. Reno was looking for you, Lyle,” Marta said, keeping her smile on. “He said it was important.”

“Thanks, I’ll go find him right now,” Lyle said with a tender hand on Sabina’s back.

“Who is Mr. Reno?” Sabina turned back to Lyle.

“The ringmaster.”

“He’s the big bossman, darling.” Marta added smartly. “Don’t worry Lyle, you can leave your fan-club here. We’ll take care of her.” Lynne and Frida giggled.

“I’ll be right back.” Lyle emphasized each word before stepping away from Sabina.

Sabina took the slings and arrows from the contortionists completely in stride. The bitterness in their smiles told of Lyle’s hero-like status in the troupe. And their rough comments only made her sure Lyle had never spoken to them, as he’d spoken to her. Besides, she was going to trust him.

And at that moment of crisp clarity, Esteban Tuck appeared beside Sabina and whispered, “Je suis enchante.” The contortionists slunk away. When Sabina turned to

greet her visitor, all she got was Esteban's plump profile with his left blue eye catching her from the side. "I hear you are accompanying the dear old crocodile tonight."

"I'm sorry?"

"Lyle the Crocodile. He told his nickname, no? No matter, I'm Lyle's dear friend, Esteban Tuck." Esteban took hold of Sabina's hand. His whiskers scratched her knuckles while his wet lips kissed.

Sabina tried to ignore it and put some laughter in her voice.

"How did Lyle get a nickname like that?"

Esteban's jowls fell limp. "A crocodile will eat just about anything for his lunch, you know? And Lyle, well he had a little reputation for dining on the fine cut and on the scrap."

Sabina's blood went cold.

Lyle saw Esteban with Sabina from across the room and half dashed the length. When he arrived, he could feel she was far away.

"What's going on?" He said, unable to keep the panic from his voice.

"Oh Lyle, I just came over here to show your lovely little choice-cut a trick I've been working on. You were the inspiration, so I thought she'd enjoy it."

Before Sabina or Lyle could sort through Esteban's change in conversation, the assistant ringmaster clapped his hands.

"Everyone, its time for a little gamesmanship. The kind that makes our wrap parties the best of any circus. You see, since Lyle and I last auditioned I've been working on a new routine. I hope you all enjoy it."

The party instinctively formed a ring around Esteban. Lyle and Sabina backed themselves to the perimeter. Their knuckles touched, but Lyle was unsure to take her hand or not. Esteban drew a surprised Marta from the crowd, placed an apple on her head, and without a second thought drew a long knife from his jacket. At fifteen paces, Esteban squared off and locked both of his eyes with Lyle's.

"I call this, 'Esteban's Gamble!'"

Esteban fired his knife sidearm, seemingly without regard. It pierced the core of the apple, without knocking it from Marta's brow. The audience could do nothing but clap.

“It is a lucky shot, no?” Esteban addressed the applause.

Lyle took hold of Sabina’s hand. “Since this is an anniversary, Esteban, you must let me unveil my own, new routine.” The crowd’s applause exploded at the hint of competition and show. Esteban melted back to the circle’s edge. Lyle led Sabina out into the center of the ring. A natural warm smile crossed her face.

“What a beauty. Such a fine haircut.” The Baszinger brothers called over the roar.

Lyle produced a deck of cards and his own throwing knife from his jacket pocket. “There’s only one card in here I care about,” Lyle called out holding up the queen of hearts and then placing it at the top of the deck. He then showed that on the bottom of the deck was the ace of diamonds. “And diamonds, well there’s one thing I’ll never have.” Lyle brought the deck over to Sabina’s chest. She held it against her dress. Lyle walked away and found Esteban in the crowd.

“I don’t have a name for this trick.” Lyle said evenly and fired the knife sidearm. The point pierced the center of the deck and fifty-one cards. Sabina held up the queen of hearts, untouched. The crowd cheered Lucky Lyle and his new assistant.